

# Collection 2: Rebuilding the Marriage

151 Questions and Responses by Peggy Vaughan

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## SEPARATING?

### What about separating?

*Question:*

*When and why should people separate?*

Peggy's Response:

This is a very complicated issue—with no simple, clear answer. However, there are some important factors to consider.

As to "when"—it's not wise to make *any* decision while in the midst of such emotional turmoil. In fact, both the person who has just been devastated by the news of a partner's affair and the person whose affair has just been exposed are in an intensely emotional state—so if they do immediately separate, it's usually based on a knee-jerk emotional reaction, not on having made a thoughtful decision.

Of course, the idea of "separating" means different things to different people. A clearly-designated temporary "time-out" to allow each person to get through the initial "survival" stage of dealing with the shock of the discovery/exposure is quite different from an all-out "separation" with overtones of potential permanence.

It's virtually impossible to think clearly enough during the immediate aftermath of the discovery of an affair to be capable of making such an important decision as to whether to separate. How well you're able to live with the decision (whatever it is) is primarily determined by whether you can honestly say to yourself that you put forth your best effort in making a good decision that you won't immediately doubt and second-guess.

As to "why"—the only sensible reason to separate is either 1) if there is total clarity by one or both parties that they're absolutely positive they want to get a divorce, or 2) if they have devoted the necessary time and energy to talking through the entire experience and determining that they can not use this crisis to develop a new (different) relationship based on honesty. In the final analysis, the decision as to whether or not to separate needs to be based on the *prospects for the future* of the relationship (as determined by how this crisis is dealt with) rather than based on what happened in the past.

## Would a separation have helped?

*Question:*

*My wife had an affair three years ago. Although I still have problems at times, I wonder if I should have left her for a period of time to spend time with myself and think everything over. I think of being on my own and wonder if a separation would of helped with my thoughts of leaving now. The affair was with my best friend who was like a brother to me and at the time he had gotten me a very good job. I still have the job and he is my boss today. I have four children and we are in love.*

*Peggy's Response:*

There's an understandable tendency to second-guess whatever actions you take (or don't take) in dealing with a spouse's affair—and in deciding where to go from there. In *general*, from what I've observed through the years, it's preferable to go slow in making any significant decisions—since the emotional upheaval makes it difficult to think straight. So neither separating nor staying together is likely to significantly speed up the slow, difficult process of clarifying your thoughts.

A couple of other issues mentioned in this letter stand out as significant. One is that the third party was a friend—and boss. It's *possible* that much of the issue related to "still having problems at times" has more to do with the continuing close contact with the third party than with whether or not there was a separation at some earlier point. The continuing presence of the third party in your life increases the difficulty in dealing with this whole situation.

Another (somewhat cynical, but realistic) consideration is whether the third party's motives in providing a job might have been more that *just* due to friendship. For instance, I was shocked to learn—many years after my husband no longer worked for a particular man—that one of the reasons he wanted my husband to work with him was so he would have more access/exposure to me. (We never had any kind of relationship beyond being "couple friends," but it was a real eye-opener to both my husband and myself to learn of this *additional* factor—besides the fact that my husband was talented and well-qualified for the job.)

The aspects of a letter like the above that usually get my attention are statements like the closing—"we are in love." While love is not *all* that's needed in rebuilding a marriage and overcoming an affair, it's a key ingredient—and probably a far more significant factor in having stayed together rather than separating to "think everything over."

## Why does he want me now that I want a separation?

*Question:*

*Now that I want a separation and he doesn't, does this present another chase for him? I feel he is somewhat obsessed with me now, when before he could care less.*

Peggy's Response:

In any relationship, there's usually a sense that one person "wants" or "needs" more from the other than is true in reverse. The *more* clingy/needy one person is, the more distant the other is likely to become—and likewise, the more independent/*not*—needy one person is, the more solicitous the other is likely to become. (While this smacks of the old adolescent idea of playing "hard to get"—it's much more complex than that—and is *not* a game or a manipulation. It's simply a common dynamic that exists within most relationships.)

In a healthy, fairly balanced, more egalitarian kind of relationship, there will be a natural shift from time to time in the sense of who wants/needs more from the other. However, in some relationships, one person may always seem to be more focused on themselves (being more independent and more attuned to meeting their own wants/needs)—while the other is constantly focused on their partner (being more dependent and accommodating to the wants/needs of their partner.)

Of course, *any* significant event (like dealing with an affair) can lead to shifts in the dynamics of the relationship. (It's interesting to note that whereas one might *think* that the person who had an affair would now be in the position of being more accommodating, etc., that's not necessarily the case. Each person seems to have their own way of interpreting the situation and behaving in ways that reinforce their way of viewing themselves and the relationship.)

An excellent discussion of the way people handle this balance of power within their relationships is contained in a book called *The Passion Trap* by Dean C. Delis—where this dynamic is referred to as being in a "one-up" or "one-down" position.

It's important to note, however, that it's *not* the case that the person in the one-up position "wins" while the one in the one-down position "loses." *both* people lose what might otherwise be possible in the relationship whenever there's too much imbalance—when there is too great a gap between how much each wants and needs from the other.

But since we tend to be more *aware* of the problems when in the one-down position, here are some tips from the book as to what can be done by the person who feels they are one-down in the relationship:

1. *Be good to yourself.*

2. *Get a grip on reality.*

*An emotional crisis clouds your perceptions—and when you're not thinking straight, it's hard to act in your best interests. You tend to catastrophize, self-sabotage, and exaggerate the other's behaviors.*

3. *Have brave new thoughts.*

*Think of how YOU can change, don't be afraid to think of creative ways to save a relationship.*

4. *Create healthy distance.*

*Keep busy, don't neglect other areas of life, build new strengths, do things on your own that have nothing to do with the other person.*

*5. Explain what you're doing.*

*Don't try to "pretend" to your partner. Let them know what you're doing.*

*6. Face your fears of distance.*

*Write down your biggest fear of distance, reframe your fear in nonaccusatory terms, and tell your partner how you're now re-thinking these fears.*

*7. Define your limits.*

*This is not an ultimatum, but a way of bringing a resolution instead of continuing indefinitely in the one-up, one-down situation.*

## Will it help to separate?

*Question:*

*My husband had a 2+ year affair with someone in our community. I discovered this over a year ago. We went for counseling and he cut all ties with other woman. Unfortunately, I see this woman on occasion in the community. I react with angry verbal attacks on my husband. I've now asked him to move temporarily so I can learn to deal with this reality on my own (seeing the other woman in the community). Do you feel this will help? Do you have any other suggestions? We want to put this behind us.*

**Peggy's Response:**

While I can't know the best course of action in a specific case like the one above, in general "moving out" is a potentially effective step ONLY when there is either uncertainty about wanting to save the marriage—or if emotions are out-of-control during the initial "survival" stage of dealing with the shock of the discovery/exposure.

It's difficult to see the potential benefit in "separating" a year later—in order to "learn to deal with this reality (of seeing the other woman) on my own." Naturally, if the husband is gone/unavailable, it avoids "reacting with angry verbal attacks on my husband." But avoiding the verbal attacks only deals with the "symptom," not the underlying "problem"—which is dealing with the feelings themselves that are triggered by seeing the other woman. Since the strong emotions would still be present (whether or not they are expressed), asking the husband to move out wouldn't address the real issue.

A better course to pursue might be one that works simultaneously on a practical issue (finding ways to diminish the exposure to the other woman) and on an attitude issue (finding ways to diminish the emotional reaction to seeing her).

Diminishing exposure would involve considering all possible options (including drastic ones such as physically moving to a different neighborhood or city). Diminishing the emotional reaction would involve deliberately/conscientiously/continuously taking steps to get control of the strong emotional reaction.

Efforts to control the emotional reaction include getting more understanding and perspective of the "role" of the other woman (see the Article, "Comparisons with the Third Party" that is posted on the Website.

And for help in understanding how your emotions are triggered and how to work against being controlled by your emotions, see the Article, "Getting Control of Anger and other Emotions" that is also posted on the Website.

## MARRIAGE/DIVORCE?

### When will I be able to decide?

*Question:*

*I found out 2 days ago that my husband has been having an affair for 3 months. I am not sure where I want (and where he wants) our marriage to go. I am feeling a thousand different emotions every hour!!! When will I be able to make a rational decision regarding trying to make it work or going through with a divorce?*

Peggy's Response:

It's impossible to make a "rational decision" after only 2 days (or 2 weeks or 2 months) as to whether to try to make the marriage work or get a divorce. For the first 3 to 6 months, the primary challenge is just to be able to eat, sleep, and function. As soon as you can fairly consistently do those things, you can begin to consider your choice for the future.

So in the meantime, it's important to get as much information and perspective about affairs as possible in order to make a good decision when you have overcome the initial trauma enough to be capable of making one. It's also important to confide in someone (either/or a friend, family member, or counselor) so you aren't struggling with this situation alone. But don't ask or expect anyone to tell you what you should do—and if anyone tries to dictate your decision, kindly tell them you appreciate their concern but you need to make the decision yourself AFTER you learn enough to feel capable of making it.

One of the reasons it takes time to make a good/rational decision is that the decision needs to be based on the prospects for the future of the relationship and not determined by what happened regarding the affair. Regardless of who the affair was with or how long it lasted, etc., the best way to decide about the future is to do a clear-eyed assessment of the prospects for the future of the marriage.

Here's an excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth* that focuses on some of the factors involved in making such an assessment:

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? Changes of this kind don't happen overnight, but unless there's an indication of movement in this direction, there's little hope for developing a good marriage."

(end of quote from *The Monogamy Myth*)

See the book—specifically Chapter 9 "The Marriage/Divorce Dilemma"—for information on other aspects of this decision, including: ambivalence (as well as spouse's ambivalence), advice from others, the practical factors (like money and children), and other considerations for making a rational decision.

## Should I go ahead with divorce?

*Question:*

*Four days ago I found out about my wife's affair, and I have already made an appointment with a lawyer for divorce. Am I reacting too fast to the situation or should I wait and see if we can recover from this? What percentage of married couples have been able to survive an affair?*

Peggy's Response:

The impulse to immediately give up and get a divorce is totally understandable during the initial stage of shock of learning of a mate's affair. And while getting a divorce may ultimately be the choice someone makes, it's almost impossible to make a thoughtful "decision" so quickly. Learning of a spouse's affair is usually so emotionally devastating that it takes some time to be able to clearly "think" at all.

Another drawback to acting too quickly in deciding to get a divorce is that *later* there's likely to be a lot of "second-guessing" and wondering "if only..." The *process* by which someone makes the decision has a huge impact on how well they're able to live with whatever decision they make.

Having said that, however, it's not a matter of simply "waiting to see if we can recover from this." Recovery is not something that just "happens" by staying together and waiting for it to happen. While it does take time to recover, the time needs to be spent doing the kind of honest communicating and practicing the kinds of behaviors that can *lead* to recovery.

As for what percentage of married couples do survive an affair, the number is far higher than most people think—since so many couples who stay together never acknowledge to friends or family that they have faced this issue. However, my personal experience (and that of other professionals who have reported on this) would indicate that approximately 70% of couples may actually stay together.

There is, of course, among this group a wide range of types of marriages. Some marriages "stay together" in a deadened, meaningless way—while others not only *recover*, but become stronger than they ever were prior to the affairs.

The bottom line of all of this is that each couple needs to determine for themselves the best course of action. And a decision as to whether to stay married or get a divorce is best made if it's based on the *prospects for the future*—not simply on what happened in the past.

## How long do I wait?

Here are 2 similar questions about this issue:

*Question #1 (from a man)*

*What is the normal timeframe for the involved party in deciding what they want to do? It has been 8 weeks since I found out about my wife's affair. While we have made great strides in improving our relationship, she still has not decided that our relationship is where she wants to commit. The past 5 weeks have been very positive and she is more than 75% sure she is leaning toward returning to our marriage and family. It is very frustrating to wait with this situation so unsettled.*

*Question #2 (from a woman)*

*How do I handle myself while he is trying to decide whether to come home & commit to our marriage or to go with the "other woman"? We have 2 children & he has to come over to see them. I am trying to work things out, but how "understanding" should I be with him having one foot in and one foot out?? He has not given her up yet. I don't know how to react to meet his needs, etc.—when he hasn't decided yet.*

Peggy's Response:

As the two letters above indicate, the person having an affair (whether man or woman) often doesn't know precisely what they want to do following the disclosure/exposure of an affair. Most of the time, they haven't realistically contemplated the possibility of the affair becoming known—so they only begin trying to sort through their thinking at a time when emotions on all sides are likely to be running quite high.

Most people assume that when an affair is discovered, it's the hurt spouse who is trying to decide whether to stay or leave—but far more often than people realize it's the one who had the affair who is ambivalent. This, of course, simply compounds the difficulty for the hurt spouse who is already struggling with their own efforts to cope with the knowledge of the affair, only to find that the affair (or at least the "contact") has not ended.

There's no realistic way of "working on a marriage" as long as the third party is in the picture—so the hurt spouse is left in limbo until there is a clear commitment from the one who had an affair. Unfortunately, the person who had an affair may be willing to stay "undecided" considerably longer than the spouse bargains for. In fact, many people prefer to "keep their options" open as long as possible, only making a final decision when either the spouse or the third party insists, being unwilling to continue waiting for the decision to be made.

This awareness may lead a hurt spouse to think they should give an "ultimatum." But ultimatums are extremely risky—because it's essential that a person be confident they really mean it and are not just "bluffing," hoping they won't have to follow through. On the other hand, just standing by, waiting and waiting, is not necessarily effective either.

While each person must decide for themselves just what they want to do and are willing to do, the most practical and sanity-saving approach is usually to avoid "putting your life on hold." This means staying active and involved in lots of other activities and with lots of other people—rather than focusing all your attention on the partner. Also, while not giving an "ultimatum" per se, to be clear that you are going ahead with your life—that you hope your partner will be a part of it, but that you are not waiting to live.

Most important, use this "waiting-time" to focus on being "prepared" (in a practical way) for the possibility of an eventual separation/divorce. Then even if the preparations are not needed, you

will have become a stronger, more confident person in the meantime—which will be of great benefit, whether you eventually separate or stay together and rebuild your marriage.

## When will we *know* we want to stay together?

### *Question:*

*Since my wife told me of her affair 8 months ago we have been struggling to recover. We talk more, spend more time with each other, have good sex (which is getting better); however, we are still unsure if we will make it as we still both have our 'good' and 'bad' days. Is this normal after so long? How will we know that we have recovered enough to say 'I want to stay with you'?*

### Peggy's Response:

The above is an absolutely normal description of the process involved in recovering and knowing you want to stay together. Actually, it's entirely possible to know you *want* to stay together long before you feel sure that you'll actually succeed. For instance, my husband and I both knew from the beginning that we "wanted to stay together"—but it still took about 2 years to know for sure that we were going to be successful.

As I've repeatedly point 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, it can be *encouraging* to know that it's normal for it to take such a long time.

However, it requires more than just the passage of time to bring about full recovery; it takes both people actively working toward recovery (as described above). Full recovery is a slow, jerky process that involves 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.

As for when you know for sure that you want to stay together and that you can succeed in recovering, it's partly determined by an accumulation of ongoing honesty and trust-building actions. There's no magic moment when you *know*; it's a process of gradually feeling more and more sure—until one day you no longer have the same nagging question in your head. When that time comes, you'll know it. In the meantime, it simply can't be rushed.

## Is it best to stay?

*Question:*

*How do I decide if it's best to stay with a partner who cheated? I'm afraid that if I stay, I might be missing out on being with someone who would care enough not to make such a heinous mistake. Am I wrong to believe this? Please help...*

*Peggy's Response:*

No one has a crystal ball to see just what the future holds—whether a person stays with a partner who cheated or leaves in hoping of eventually finding someone new who won't make the same mistake. While it's not "wrong" to believe someone could be found who wouldn't have affairs, affairs are so prevalent that there's certainly no assurance of that.

So the best approach is to base the decision on assessing the prospects for the future of the marriage—not focusing only on what happened in the past. Here are some considerations (excerpted from *The Monogamy Myth*) 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? Changes of this kind don't happen overnight, but unless there's an indication of movement in this direction, there's little hope for developing a good marriage.

(end of excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*)

## What about staying when they've had multiple affairs?

*Question:*

*I understand why someone might choose to stay when there has only been one affair. But what about men or women who have multiple affairs? Is this a symptom of a much larger problem?*

*Peggy's Response:*

As for whether multiple affairs are a symptom of a much larger problem, the number of affairs is far less relevant to the prospects for the future of the marriage than what happens once the affairs are known. So the same reasons for staying are relevant whether there has been one affair or many affairs. In fact, I personally chose to stay—despite the fact that my own husband had about 17 affairs.)

Here is an excerpt from our book, *Beyond Affairs*, where I go into a little more depth about my "reasons for staying:"

*"Some people have asked why I even tried to work through it. They thought I should have gotten out. It's very clear to me why I stayed. When James told me about his affairs and came to understand the pain they had caused, he literally became a different person. He became all I could possibly want in a man. He was totally honest and fair with me, he loved me completely, and he was committed to doing everything in his power to support me in whatever I wanted in life. He wanted me to be happy, no matter what kind of life I chose.*

*I realized I might never find another man who would reach that degree of caring. I'd be foolish to give him up after he changed his way of relating to me. I could wish he's always been this way so I wouldn't have to accommodate to the two different people he represented in my mind. But that kind of thinking is as unrealistic as the "happy ever after" fairytales. No one gets everything they want in life, and this life with him gives me more of what I want than any other.*

*I'll probably always wish none of this had happened. The philosopher Nietzsche said: "That which does not kill me, makes me stronger." For the first three years I thought it might kill me—but it didn't. I'm a stronger person today for the experience, and our relationship is stronger too. That's not to say I would have chosen to have all this happen. But I'm reminded of a poster I once saw that said, "If life gives you a lemon, make lemonade." This experience was a bitter lemon, but some very good things have resulted from using it to make something better. Nothing is more refreshing than the kind of honesty we have now.*

*I've been asked, "How can you ever trust him again?" What I trust is his honesty—that he will never deceive me again. If he were promising specific things he would or wouldn't do, I couldn't trust that. Nobody knows absolutely what they will or will not ever do. But he's promised me honesty.*

*The real key to trusting this honesty is that he doesn't just say it—he practices it. He never hesitates to answer any question I ask him...about anything. He doesn't try to avoid issues that he thinks might upset me. He's willing to "eyeball" me on any subject I want to discuss. The hours and hours he spent answering my questions about affairs earned him my trust in his honesty and helped me overcome my pain."*

(end of excerpt from *Beyond Affairs*)

One of the pressures that a person may feel *not* to stay comes from the criticism of others—who think that they would have gotten a divorce. Of course, it's a fallacy for anyone to think they know how they would act if it happened to them, and even more unreasonable to think they know what's best for someone else. Unfortunately, people simply don't understand much about this issue unless they've been through it themselves. So it's important for the person who decides to stay married to keep this perspective when confronted with the negative reactions of others.

Finally, I am *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.

## Is it time to call it quits?

*Question:*

*My husband had an affair with a family member (of mine) several years ago. Of course, he talks like I was the one to blame. He shows absolutely no true remorse, only that he got caught. My sister-in-law told me he's said he wishes it never happened, but after all these years he's still in contact, just to see how she's doing. We haven't been intimate in years. How can I get my marriage back together when he won't willingly work at it? Maybe it's just time to call it quits? We have 3 grown children and one still at home.*

*Peggy's Response:*

Frankly, neither I nor anyone else can know whether it's time to call it quits. In fact, there isn't a right or wrong decision, only the one that works for each individual personally. Two different people may have the same set of conditions but make different decisions—and in each case it might be the best decision for each of them. That's because people have differing values and priorities about factors that have an impact on their decision.

But knowing when to decide whether it's time to leave is a very common problem, so I'll begin by sharing an excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth* where I discuss this issue.

### The Importance of Timing

*Timing is one of the most crucial factors in determining the ability to live comfortably with the decision... If a person leaves too soon, the issues may never be fully dealt with... But delaying the decision too long is also likely to create lasting problems.*

*While waiting long enough to overcome the initial shock of the affair is a positive step, it's important that the time be spent actually working toward making a decision rather than becoming trapped in a strained relationship simply by failing to decide. At some point, a person may know within their heart that it's time to leave, but continue to put off the actual departure. Then they discover that they've accommodated to a situation that would have seemed intolerable had they not waited so long that it became tolerable by virtue of its familiarity.*

*In some sense, there's a "window," a period of time when it's best to leave. Having missed the prime opening, some people feel the window is forever closed. As the crisis abates and they turn their attention to other areas of life, they simply give up the idea of leaving. It's sad when people give up on a relationship too soon, but it's just as sad when they fail to leave an unrecoverable relationship.*

(end of excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*)

To more specifically address the particular situation described in the question...

The key problem with any possible resolution to this issue is inherent in the question itself: "How can I get my marriage back together?" The fact that "he won't willingly work at it" means that it's up to her to decide (for herself) how/whether to continue or "call it quits."

Just based on the questions, it would appear that there may be some "practical factors" (like still having a child at home - or perhaps financial issues, etc.) that might lead to staying in a marriage where there are so many negative indicators from the spouse: still in contact with other woman, no intimacy, and being unwilling to work to improve the situation. (And if this is the case, that's a perfectly legitimate decision to make.)

However, if someone does want to try to get the marriage back together, the most likely prospect for that *may* be to stop focusing on getting the spouse to change, but to try making some changes in your own focus and direction. The bottom line is that we can't really change other people, but we may be able to influence them to decide to change in reaction to our own changes.

In any relationship, there's usually a sense that one person "wants" or "needs" more from the other than is true in reverse. The more clingy/needy one person is, the more distant the other is likely to become—and likewise, the more independent/less-needy one person is, the more solicitous the other is likely to become. (While this smacks of the old adolescent idea of playing "hard to get"—it's much more complex than that—and is not a game or a manipulation. It's simply a common dynamic that exists within most relationships.)

In a healthy, fairly balanced, more egalitarian kind of relationship, there will be a natural shift from time to time in the sense of who wants/needs more from the other. However, in some relationships, one person may always seem to be more focused on themselves (being more independent and more attuned to meeting their own wants/needs)—while the other is constantly focused on their partner (being more dependent and accommodating to the wants/needs of their partner.)

So until a person becomes clear about what decision they want to make about "calling it quits," following the above guidelines can help be better prepared if/when that time comes. And in the meantime, they're likely to be better satisfied with life.

## How long should I wait to decide?

*Question:*

*I found out about my husband's affair 14 months ago. We are together after a 7-month separation. Now, I am wondering if I should have kept walking. I'm not sure I want this marriage to work. Is there a certain time I should give?*

*Peggy's Response:*

When a person discovers their mate's affair, they're likely to go through a period of great ambivalence and uncertainty. Since it's extremely difficult to cope with this period of uncertainty, it's perfectly understandable to have questions like the one in this letter about how much time to wait to see if it will work out.

However, there's no such thing as a specific amount of time; it all depends on how the time is spent. (Just waiting to see if at some point it looks like the marriage will "work" may mean waiting forever.) So the first order of business is resolving the question reflected in the statement: "I'm not sure I want this marriage to work." Without *wanting* it to work, it's not likely to happen.

This ambivalence can feel like a Catch 22—in that people often hesitate to commit to wanting it to work unless/until they think they will succeed; while at the same time, it's unlikely to work unless/until there's a commitment to wanting it to work.

Once there's clarity about this issue, there's still the reasonable question of how long to "give it" to see if it will work. It's sad when people give up on a relationship too soon, but it's just as sad when they fail to leave an unrecoverable relationship. The most critical impact of the timing is in how well (or poorly) a person is able to live with the decision, regardless of how it turns out.

Deciding whether to stay married or get a divorce is a complicated decision, but carefully considering all the relevant factors (their personal values and priorities as well as other practical considerations) can allow them to make the decision that best fits their individual situation. And by making a carefully considered decision in a rational way they should reap the benefits of being more confident and at peace with whatever decision they make.

So the ambivalence that's expressed in this letter is not necessarily bad; in fact, it's preferable to the impulse to decide too quickly. Any hasty decisions are likely to complicate the difficult process of coping with the aftermath of an affair. A person who takes time to recover some sense of emotional stability before deciding their future will be more likely to make a satisfying decision.

## Should we give up and move on?

*Question:*

*Your article on "recovering those loving feelings" states that sometimes it is impossible to do if the spark is gone. My wife and I have come a long way in trying to build a happy marriage since her short affair ended 7 months ago. However, while she loves me, she is not "in love" with me. She would change this if she could, but is unable to. Our intimate relationship is non-existent, and I feel lonely, depressed and unfulfilled. Is it best to just give up now and move on with our lives?*

*Peggy's Response:*

This question presents an opportunity to clarify the basis for everything I write—which is only to talk *in general* about what "usually" happens or "usually" works (based on reports I've received from so many people through the years). It's only intended as guidance in terms of providing some overall perspective about various issues—*not* in passing absolute judgment.

For instance, in the article referred to above, I used words like *may* have so-and-so or *less likely* to so-and-so or that it's *easier* if so-and so-always leaving the door open for other possibilities. But in circumstances like the one described above (when someone is already feelings discouraged) it's easy to see any points that potentially feed into the discouragement as a sign that it's hopeless. This is *not* the case; it simply lets you know what you're up against. In the same article I also talk about a number of things people can do to try to recover the loving feelings.

But most important, I talk about understanding the changing nature of love. Whenever someone reports (as in the above letter): "she loves me, (but) she is not "in love" with me—it simply reflects an erroneous emphasis being placed on being "in love." The feelings of being "in love" are typical of any *new* love (and therefore an affair often *feels* like "being in love"—which by comparison leads people to think they're no longer "in love" with their spouse when the affair ends. But if someone "loves" their spouse (even though they don't feel they're "in love" with them)—then there IS something to build on. It's only if there's *no* love left that it's *less likely* (but still not impossible) to recover those loving feelings.

Another comment in the above letter: "She would change this if she could, but is unable to..." is also a misunderstanding. All too often we think of love *only* as a "feeling," but there's strong evidence that love can also be a "decision." So part of the hope for recovering the loving feelings is *deciding* to do so. This doesn't mean you can "force" the feelings—but it does mean that you decide to be open to them and take the kind of actions that will "let them come in." Here's the way we describe it in our book, *Making Love Stay*:

"Of course, the title of this book is misleading if you take it literally; you can't arbitrarily and unilaterally make love do anything. On the other hand, love doesn't come and go capriciously. This book is about what you can do that will make all the difference in whether or not your love will stay."

Since loving feelings are often a byproduct of loving/caring behavior, we spend the entire book going over the many, many little things that people can do every single day (small loving acts of caring) that can make all the difference in the world. Naturally, no one wants to feel lonely, depressed and unfulfilled, but giving up and moving on is not the *only* way to alleviate these feelings. If *both* people genuinely want to increase their intimacy, they *can* do it—not by sitting around waiting to "magically" begin feeling close again—but by doing things that can lead to that

kind of closeness. When the pain is so great, it makes sense to *either* give up and move on *or* get busy actually *doing* something that will lead to more closeness.

## How do you know whether/when to divorce?

### *Question:*

*I see most sites like this encourage parties to stay together after an affair is discovered, and that really aggravates me. I tried for seven years and it was a big mistake. Should have gotten out. Divorced anyway and wasted those years.*

### Peggy's Response:

This "question" was actually submitted in our "Comments" form rather than as a Question. However, it raises a couple of important questions: first, the idea that this site "encourages parties to stay together after an affair is discovered," and second, the issue of the timing of a decision about whether to stay married or get a divorce.

Regarding whether this site "encourages parties to stay together..."

I do not specifically encourage staying together; instead I discourage parties assuming that a divorce is inevitable after an affair. (Prior to any experience with affairs, most people will vow to leave their marriage if it ever happens, but once faced with the reality, many people make different decisions.)

A decision as to whether to stay married or get a divorce needs to depend on what happens after discovery of the affair rather than what happened before. Here are some guidelines for Solving the Marriage/Divorce Dilemma that I present in my book, *The Monogamy Myth*:

- 1. Make your own decision (regardless of what others think).*
- 2. Do not rush the decision.*
- 3. Get as much information as possible about your own situation and about affairs in general.*
- 4. Consider the emotional piece of this, but realize it's only one part, not the sole basis for a good decision.*
- 5. Consider the practical factors involved (including money, kids, and other relevant issues), but realize the importance of balancing these concerns with the more personal, emotional needs.*
- 6. 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."*

Some considerations include a willingness to talk about what happened and try to learn from it and a commitment to honesty as the basis of the relationship in the future. Changes of this kind don't happen overnight, but unless there's an indication of movement in this direction, there's little hope for developing a good marriage.

Regarding the timing of making a decision, see Guidelines #2 above: Do not rush the decision. It's important not to make any decision too quickly—while the raw emotions make it almost impossible to think clearly.

The "question" posed at the top of this page refers to having "wasted" those years instead of getting out right away. However, it's not necessarily a waste to wait some reasonable time (although a couple of years should be sufficient to make a clear decision). When someone decides too quickly to get out, they may second-guess themselves and forever wonder whether they made the right decision. But if they are clear that they have made a thoughtful, rational decision, they're much more likely to be able to live peacefully with whatever decision they make. So what's

important is not just what decision is ultimately made, but the process that is used to make the decision.

## What do I do when he keeps changing?

*Question:*

*My husband has had 2 affairs that he will admit to, but several others he won't. I feel the relationship is over, but can't pull away from him. When I try, he starts acting like the man I married - until I back off, then everything is my fault. What do I do?*

*Peggy's Response:*

Many people are ambivalent about what to do (and even about what they want)—when dealing with the aftermath of an affair. We generally want to make sure we're making the right decisions. For the person in the position of the one who wrote the above question, there's ambivalence in the form of "feeling the relationship is over" when her husband is uncommunicative; then "backing off" when he "starts acting like the man I married." Understandably, she's reacting to his behavior.

On the other hand, he is also reacting to *her* behavior. When he feels her "pulling away from him," he begins focusing on the impact of her leaving and changes his attitude and behavior. But when she backs off and stops pulling away, he feels safe to resume his previous attitude and behavior.

This creates an ongoing merry-go-round where each person is reacting to the behavior of the other—which can continue for quite some time unless one of them breaks the cycle. Since he may be willing to continue in this kind of ambivalence as long as she cooperates in "playing the game," she may need to stop changing her behavior in reaction to his changes.

Then the challenge is to find a "middle-ground" that maintains an openness to the possibility of hanging in while demonstrating a clear ability to be independent. One of the best sets of guidelines for that kind of behavior is taken from a book I've mentioned before that, unfortunately, is no longer in print. It is *The Passion Trap* by Dean C. Delis.

This book clearly defines the problems related to an "imbalance between partners"—when one is in the "one-up" position and the other is in the "one-down" position. (And, of course, these positions can shift as described in the above question.) It describes how in any relationship, there's usually a sense at any given time that one person wants or needs more from the other than is true in reverse. When one partner acts more needy, the other is likely to want more distance. And when one partner acts more independent, the other is likely to be more solicitous. (This sounds like what's happening in the description in the above question.)

Here are some tips from the book as to how to establish your own way of acting—rather than only reacting to your partner. (I have shared these before, but they're worth repeating.)

*1. Be good to yourself.*

*2. Get a grip on reality.*

*An emotional crisis clouds your perceptions—and when you're not thinking straight, it's hard to act in your best interests. You tend to catastrophize, self-sabotage, and exaggerate the other's behaviors.*

*3. Have brave new thoughts.*

*Think of how YOU can change, don't be afraid to think of creative ways to save a relationship.*

4. *Create healthy distance.*

*Keep busy, don't neglect other areas of life, build new strengths, do things on your own that have nothing to do with the other person.*

5. *Explain what you're doing.*

*Don't try to "pretend" to your partner. Let them know what you're doing.*

6. *Face your fears of distance.*

*Write down your biggest fear of distance, reframe your fear in nonaccusatory terms, and tell your partner how you're now re-thinking these fears.*

7. *Define your limits.*

*This is not an ultimatum, but a way of bringing a resolution instead of continuing indefinitely in the one-up, one-down situation.*

## Should I leave?

*Question:*

*I have been struggling with the grieving process for the last two years since discovering his addiction to pornography. I understand and support your ideas about the need for him to be accountable and also to answer all questions about this. Since his denial is so strong, he is not able to own up to his behavior, let alone answer questions. Should I leave?*

*Peggy's Response:*

I would never tell any specific person whether or not they should leave. This question presents an opportunity to clarify the basis for everything I write—which is only to talk *in general* about what "usually" happens or "usually" works (based on reports I've received from so many people through the years). It's only intended as guidance in terms of providing some overall perspective about various issues—*not* in passing absolute judgment.

Deciding whether to stay married or get a divorce is a complicated decision, but carefully considering all the relevant factors (your personal values and priorities as well as other practical considerations) can allow you to make the decision that best fits your individual situation. And by making a carefully considered decision in a rational way, you should reap the benefits of being more confident and at peace with whatever decision you make.

Here's are some excerpts from *The Monogamy Myth* about:

- the fact that there is no one answer that fits for everyone.
- the need to consider everything in making your own decision.

### *NO EASY ANSWERS*

*No matter how much time and energy a person puts into the effort to get their partner to talk, it's still quite possible that they won't succeed. If they simply can not get the answers they want about their partner's affair, they need to find a way to accept this situation. It usually takes a long time to reach this point, since most people continue trying to get their spouse to talk long after it's clear that their efforts are in vain. One woman who had tried for almost two years to get her husband to discuss his affairs finally accepted the fact that he was never going to talk about why it happened. It was easier for her to accept this situation once she realized that there may be no clear reason, that even the person having an affair may not know exactly why it happened.*

*In the final analysis, each person is responsible for making their own decision (regardless of the opinions of friends, family, professionals, or the general public) because they have to live with the choice they make. It takes strength and clear-headedness for a person to independently assess the situation and do whatever is best for them. They need to avoid making a decision purely on emotion; it's critical that they be able to think through all the factors, both emotional and practical.*

### *THE PRACTICAL FACTORS*

*Some people are critical of the idea of considering practical factors in deciding whether to stay married or get a divorce. They have the sense that a person should stick to certain principles, no matter what the cost. But those people are usually the ones who haven't personally faced this dilemma.*

*While money and kids are the most significant practical considerations in trying to decide whether to stay married or get a divorce, they're not the only ones. There's a wide range of factors that are important to different people: involvement with a home or garden, being in business together and not wanting to lose what they've worked for, elderly parents who would be hurt by their divorce, and (perhaps the most common concern) the impact on their relationships with friends and other family members."*

(end of excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*)

## How long does it take to decide whether to stay or go?

*Question:*

*It's been 5 months since my husband stopped having affairs and I learned about his other life. He is doing everything you talk about to help us recover and answers all my questions. He shows me that he's committed to working things out. I vacillate about what I want though. I am shocked by what he's done and by his dishonesty and feel like I've missed out on a lot in our marriage by what my husband's done. How long does it take to decide whether to stay or go?*

*Peggy's Response:*

This is an issue that has come up many times in the past—and I have addressed it before. But since it plagues many people, I'll review some of the main points.

First of all, I want to point out something that I've frequently noted: that this whole process takes time. I have never known anyone who completely recovered in less than 2 years. And even though my husband and I both knew from the beginning that we "wanted" to stay together, it still took about 2 years to know for sure that we were going to be successful.

Of course, it requires more than just the passage of time; it takes both people actively working toward recovery (as described in the above question). This is a slow, jerky process that involves 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.

As for when you know for sure that you want to stay together and that you can succeed in recovering, it's partly determined by an accumulation of ongoing honesty and trust-building actions. There's no magic moment when you know; it's a process of gradually feeling more and more sure—until one day you no longer have the same nagging question in your head. When that time comes, you'll know it. In the meantime, it simply can't be rushed.

The following is adapted 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 material from *The Monogamy Myth*)

## Is it normal for him to be so undecided?

*Question:*

*This month marks our 1st year anniversary of the discovery of my affair. My husband is still struggling back and forth whether or not he wants the marriage. What should I do, and is this normal? At one time it seemed as though he made a final decision and we built a new home, is it now fair for him to take his decision back as far as staying with me?*

Peggy's Response:

Ongoing feelings of confusion, ambivalence, and uncertainty in dealing with a spouse's affair are quite common. I can personally vouch for the difficulty in finally being SURE it will work out to stay together. (More about my personal experience later.)

First I want to specifically address some of the questions contained in the above letter.

-- What should I do?

What you don't do is as important (or more important) than what you do. For instance, don't criticize him or become impatient with him for being unable to make a clear, firm decision. Just be as patient and supportive as possible as he goes through the unavoidable time it takes to fully recover from the emotional impact. It helps for you to fully respond to any questions he asks and to continuously reinforce your commitment to doing whatever it takes to rebuild the marriage.

-- Is this normal?

As mentioned above, it's quite normal to feel uncertain about the future. I clearly recall that even though I wanted to stay married (and decided to stay married), I didn't know whether I really could. It just seemed like so much to deal with - that I would periodically wish for amnesia or fantasize about running away and taking on a new identity. I felt discouraged that it was so difficult and took so long to recover. (As I've repeatedly pointed out, I've never known anyone, including myself, who completely recovered in less than two years. So after one year, there's no reason to believe that it's all "in the past.")

-- At one time it seem as though he made a final decision and we built a new home.

This is another specific situation with which I can identify. We had intended to build a home (to begin shortly after my husband told me about his affairs). Once I learned of the affairs, I said maybe we should postpone building until we could be sure we were going to make it. Since I wanted to "make it," we decided to proceed, so we went ahead and began the building process. Almost exactly a year from the time he told me about his affairs, we moved into our new home. But, as I said earlier, it was about two years before I felt fully confident that we would permanently live together in that home. While I never wavered in my decision to want to be able to stay together, it took that long for me to be sure I could actually do it.

-- Is it now fair for him to take his decision back as far as staying with me?

You really don't want to get into a debate about what's "fair," given the gross "unfairness" of his being put in the position of having to deal with the affair. The thing about affairs that people often fail to fully recognize is that there are all kinds of undesirable consequences of the affair—for all concerned. One of the consequences for him is determining whether he can finally recover from the affair, and one of the consequences for you is coping with his struggle to deal with it.

While it may not feel that way, it's a positive sign that "at one time it seemed as though he made a final decision." That represents a clear *intention* to recover and rebuild. Frankly, within the first couple of years, all that's realistically possible is to want to, to intend to, to try to stay in the marriage. There can be no absolute guarantee, even with the best of intentions. So it's important not to give up all hope unless and until he does. As long as he's still struggling, just be as supportive as possible in helping him deal with the struggle rather than "adding insult to injury" by criticizing him for not yet being completely sure.

## When is it time to let go and move on?

(Here are two questions about when/whether to leave the marriage.)

*Question #1:*

*I found out 7 months ago that my husband of 25 years was having an affair. I begged him to stay. He agreed not to see her anymore, but I found out he spoke with her several times (he says not lately). He still has strong feelings for her. I don't know what to do. I have been put on antidepressants and feel so lost. He works out of town where they met every other week. Should I move on?*

*Question #2:*

*How do you know when it is time to "let go," when the marriage just isn't recovering?*

Peggy's Response:

In one of the above letters, it's been 7 months since finding out about the affair, and we don't know how long it's been for the second one. But, in general, a final decision to give up and/or move on is better made later rather than sooner. It usually takes at least 6 months to recover from the emotional impact of this experience sufficiently to even begin to think clearly enough to make such a major decision. And it usually takes 2 years to feel that you've exhausted all the possibilities for determining whether there's potential for rebuilding the marriage.

So even if there's an eventual decision to divorce after two years or more, it's better to have taken that time to make the decision—specifically in order to feel confident that it's a decision you can "live with." Too quickly deciding to divorce is likely to lead to second-guessing, always wondering "what if I'd...should I have... etc." Whereas exhausting all your best efforts before leaving leads to a much greater likelihood of being more confident and at peace with the decision. In other words, it's not just what decision is made, but how, why, and when it's made that determines the degree of satisfaction with the decision.

There are always exceptions to taking a longer time to consider whether to leave. For instance, in the first letter above, the fact that he is still seeing the other woman and having strong feelings for her may mean that time is not the main factor. Frankly, the potential for rebuilding the marriage can't even BEGIN until all contact is severed with the other woman. And, in the meantime, consideration must be given to the obvious stress of the situation (involving the use of antidepressants and feeling so lost).

The bottom line is that there's no responsible way to offer any specific advice about a particular situation like the one in the first letter. (It might be helpful to have ongoing face-to-face counseling to go into more depth about the pros and cons of "letting go.") But for situations where the affair has ended and all contact with the third party has been severed, it's reasonable to take plenty of time to make a final decision. In general, this would be about 2 years, since this is the amount of time it usually takes to sufficiently recover from the emotional impact in order to make a clear decision about the future. (Of course, even the 2-year framework for recovery is based on both people actively working toward recovery.)

I've shared these thoughts before, but here is some information (taken from ideas in *The Monogamy Myth*) about the importance of timing in making a decision to leave the marriage.

*Timing is one of the most crucial factors in determining the ability to live comfortably with the decision to get a divorce. If a person leaves too soon, the issues may never be fully dealt*

*with. While the decision itself may not be wrong, there's a good possibility that making the decision before getting an understanding of what happened will leave unresolved feelings of bitterness and resentment. There may be unanswered questions and unspoken feelings that persist for years to come. Also, the impulse to leave immediately is often a reaction to the shock of a situation for which you're un-prepared.*

*But delaying the decision too long is also likely to create lasting problems. While waiting long enough to overcome the initial shock of the affair is a positive step, it's important that the time be spent actually working toward making a decision rather than becoming trapped in a strained relationship simply by failing to decide. At some point, a person may know within their heart that it's time to leave, but continue to put off the actual departure. Then they discover that they've accommodated to a situation that would have seemed intolerable had they not waited so long that it became tolerable by virtue of its familiarity.*

*In some sense, there's a 'window,' a period of time when it's best to leave. Having missed the prime opening, some people feel the window is forever closed. As the crisis abates and they turn their attention to other areas of life, they simply give up the idea of leaving. It's sad when people fail to leave an un-recoverable relationship—but it's also unfortunate when people give up on a relationship too soon.*

(end of excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*)

## Will he/should he come back?

This past week I received inquiries from 4 different sources, asking about the same general issue: how do you know when it's time to give up? These situations involve instances where the person who had an affair has left the marriage but is ambivalent about whether or not to return—and the spouse is ambivalent about whether or not to let them return.

### Question #1:

*My husband and I have been separated for 4 months. He refuses to come back because all he thinks about are the arguments and fights we have had through the years. He seems to have forgotten the happy times we have shared. He claims he loves me and that he cares for the kids and me, but he won't come back. He claims he is not seeing anyone but he won't kiss me, hug me, touch me, take me out to anywhere. I believe he hates me. He treats me worse than an enemy. His so-called friend have even suggested that I should find someone else.*

### Question #2:

*My husband moved out 5 months ago because he continued lying and was not willing to talk freely about what happened. He says he'll do it, but as soon as we start talking, he gets upset and then we start fighting. We fight because I can tell he is lying and it just makes me very upset. He says the affair is over and wants to come back, but they still work together and just recently the 2 met for coffee. He actually shared with her that he's no longer living home! He says she was trying to share some information she thought would help him get better and that she is planning to get married. (I feel that she has no business trying to help my husband and wanting to know how he is doing). Do you think I'm being completely irrational?*

### Question #3:

*My husband has been "on the fence" for 2 years now. I keep trying everything I can to keep it together—even joining a 12-step program. It looks now like it is hopeless. He's positive he wants to be with this woman and is asking for a divorce (again). I filed 2 years ago and we went up to our settlement date when he came home and had me dismiss it. Today I asked him to make me a settlement proposal, but we ended up fighting about that. He's been having this affair for seven years now, that's why he thinks its the "real thing." How much longer do I have to take this??? When is it time to throw in the towel?*

### Question #4:

*What should I do now that my ex-spouse has finally discovered that the grass was no greener with their new lover. Reality set in and he contacted me. This caused me a great deal of pain and conflict as I am not yet completely over him and am tempted to relent. I ended up giving in to him, and engaged in sex. Now I'm really a mess emotionally. We have kids, and I'm struggling with what to do. I'm afraid that getting back together will only result in more pain. However, I can't help hoping there could be some real remorse and a desire to repair things.*

### Peggy's Response:

We tend to assume that the "hurt" spouse is the one most likely to be uncertain about whether to try to save the marriage; however, most of the time they want to at least "try." But it's not unusual for the person who *had* the affair to be the one who decides to leave—or who can't make a clear decision either way.

It's not that anyone "should" continue to hope for/work for getting their spouse back. It's just that it's the "smart" thing to do—regardless of the fact that it's "unfair" to do all the work, etc. The reason it's smart to try everything you can for as long as you can (even if the efforts eventually fail and there is a divorce) is *not* because "the marriage should be saved at all costs." It's because your ability to *live* with the divorced situation is *much* different if you know you did all you could for as long as you could before giving up.

Also, of course, it makes a difference how long they've been gone—and whether there was any opportunity to make an effort *before* they left. I add this only because sometimes people separate/divorce quickly without a chance to see whether or not the marriage could be rebuilt. So there's some advantage to being open to the "possibility" of rebuilding the marriage—primarily because if the possibility is there and is not pursued, then you may always "second-guess" yourself as to whether or not you "could have or should have" done something more.

I don't advocate "staying together at all costs," but I do advocate getting enough information and understanding about the whole situation that such a life-altering decision can be made based on an "informed opinion" rather than being based on "emotions."

Frankly, in most instances, it's impossible to know whether or not the marriage can be saved until you have exhausted absolutely every effort—which normally takes about 2 years. (And of course, 2 years is not magic since time alone doesn't help; it's only time spent actively trying to see if things can be worked out.) Even if at the end of the 2 years the decision is made to get a divorce, the time will not have been wasted because it's not just what decision is ultimately made, but when and how it's made, that makes a difference in how well you "live" with the decision.

Through the years I've heard from people over a period of many years after they learned of an affair. As I said earlier, those who too quickly gave up forever "second-guess" themselves. But those who waited and worked and tried for about 2 years had a much better chance of saving the marriage. And even if they didn't, they could then get a divorce without doubting whether they should have done more.

Until the divorce is final (and occasionally even later), there's always some possibility of getting back together. Of course, an ex's "waking up" to the reality that the grass is not greener doesn't necessarily mean they're ready to take the steps necessary to rebuild the marriage. Frankly, "wanting" to come back (or even "intending" to change) are not enough. It's their "actions" that matter. Otherwise, people can ping-pong back and forth for a long time: coming home, then leaving again, then wanting to return again, etc.

So the key is their willingness to take ACTIONS—specifically:

- severing all contact with the third party
- getting answers to your questions
- talking through the whole thing.

Yes, talking is essential. As one person wrote..."if we stop talking, we might drift further apart and it will mean the end of the marriage."

If there is no willingness to do these things, then there is unlikely to be the kind of lasting change needed. But with this kind of genuine effort, it *is* possible to rebuild the marriage into a stronger, more honest relationship than existed prior to this crisis. Since few people want a "deadened marriage" (married in name only), this is certainly worth working toward.

However, as I've said, *none* of this is to say that anyone "should" wait any particular length of time. It's just that this gives the best chance of either succeeding in saving the marriage *or* in

living with the reality of the divorce. And, of course, there is no “guarantee” about any of this; it’s simply the smarter effort to make.

The bottom line is that it’s got to be an individual decision. Because different people might be faced with the same general dilemma... but (based on their individual wants, needs, hopes, priorities, etc.) may make different decisions—and in each case the decision may be right for that particular person. For more on this whole dilemma, see these Articles posted on the website: “Deciding whether to stay married or get a divorce” and “Why stay with a spouse who has had an affair?”

(Note that at the bottom of this page about “why stay...” I write: “While I’ve tried to explain why some people choose to stay with spouses who have affairs, 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.”

The “Approach-Avoidance” Dynamic:

Below are some excerpts from my response to a person who was having an affair and was experiencing an “approach-avoidance” dynamic that often happens when a person who has had an affair can’t make a final decision. (Actually, men who have affairs are more likely to get caught up in the approach-avoidance dynamic than women—but it’s good perspective for everyone.)

The person having an affair often doesn’t know precisely what they want to do following the disclosure/exposure of an affair. Far more often than people realize, they’re ambivalent and uncertain. They want to “keep their options” open as long as possible--because they want to hold onto the positive aspects of the affair while still holding open the possibility of eventually returning to the marriage. It’s unlikely they can actually “say” that out loud (or that they can even get that degree of clarity themselves). They just know that they don’t want to face the difficulties and/or consequences of either final decision. Often it becomes a classic “approach/avoidance” situation where the closer they come to making a decision in one direction, the more likely they are to shift toward the other decision.

What frequently happens is that the married person who is having an affair initially focuses on the “positive” aspects of leaving the marriage in order to be with the third party. (During this period they often compare the positives of the affair with the negatives of the marriage, leading them to discussions and/or plans for leaving the marriage.) Then as they get closer to making that decision, there’s often a shift where they start focusing on the potential “negative” impact of this decision (financial concerns, future dealings with ex, kids, generally letting go of the family, including the “image” that goes with that), as well as concerns about the potential future with the third party.

They often don’t want to have to choose and may be willing to stay “undecided” for quite a long while. In fact, they may be willing to continue this kind of arrangement indefinitely, sometimes only making a final decision when either the spouse or the third party insists.

This is not to suggest that an “ultimatum” should be given (since those often backfire), but it’s smart for the wife to clarify that she also has a decision to make; it’s not just him. And during this “limbo” time, it’s helpful if the wife keeps as busy as possible, not neglecting other areas of life. She needs to dig down and find whatever strength can be mustered to do things on her own that have nothing to do with the other person. This can have a positive impact, not only on her own sense of herself but also on his attitude toward her (in that being “pitiful” is usually a turn-off and not at all appealing).

Of course, it's important to make every effort to get the "man in the middle" to recognize just how unfair this uncertainty is to *both* the wife *and* the other woman). He needs to make a clear decision (and commitment) to ending the affair and strictly focusing on deciding "marriage" vs. "no marriage" rather than choosing one woman/situation over the other.

There's a better prospect for making a more reasonable decision about the future when the realistic prospects for the marriage are not being assessed in comparison to the fantasy image of the affair relationship. So regardless of the eventual decision about rebuilding the marriage, severing the relationship with the other woman allows the limbo period to end. For more on the difference between the initial flush of feeling "in love" and the deeper kind of love in a long-term marriage, see these Articles posted on the website under the section Articles about Marriage and Family titled: "The Changing Nature of Love" and "The Full Monty."

Below are some thoughts from a woman with whom I had shared the above perspective:

(It's always good to hear first-hand how a specific person handled this kind of situation in their own life, so below is her sharing):

*In my own case I decided to fight for my marriage—NOT to save it at all costs, but for many reasons - primarily because I "needed" to do everything possible before I walked away as only then could I face myself and not spend weeks, months or years wondering "If only I had done....." My husband's affair was long-term and continued for over 2+1/2 years. He believed he loved the other woman and I believe she loved him. However by the time I found out - undeniably - he had tried to end the relationship with her, but doing so proved harder than he thought - and "as long as I didn't know" who was getting hurt....? and he'd told her he realized he didn't love her, never-the-less it continued.*

*The 'odds' weren't good as he repeatedly told me he would NOT change his mind, he would NOT return, there was NO hope and for me to move on with my life. I can't count the number of times he told me to stop sending him messages, letters, etc., and many of the things said were more hurtful than the infidelity itself. I guess in a nutshell, despite what anyone said or advised, I had to do what was/felt 'right' for me, no-one else, just me. Many, many times the easiest thing for me to do (as I was repeatedly advised - unasked) would have been to walk away.*

*Actions vs. words! Another factor that played a role was I knew my husband very well, and despite his "words" his "actions" weren't congruent. His words were saying one thing but many of his actions were 'saying' something else, (although he denied giving me 'mixed signals'.) For example, he didn't want separation of assets or any change to our banking habits, we would continue to attend family events together - he said the only thing that was truly changing was he wasn't living with me any more. He continued to come to the house to do 'odd jobs', mow the lawn etc., and kept a house key so he could "help" me with those type of things. I told him to return the key or give me a key to HIS residence so I could 'return the favour'. He was not impressed with this idea so I told finally him if he didn't return the key I'd have the locks changed as it wasn't acceptable he have entry into my home if I didn't have entry into his!! Again he wasn't impressed but reluctantly gave up the key.*

*He was adamant that he was not leaving me "for the other woman" but he was no longer "in love" with me. Confusion reigned supreme!! At times I thought I was going insane - again, isn't that a familiar feeling? I must add that "knowing" my husband so well was not always a plus, I knew he very rarely reversed a decision for any reason, and at times would "cut off his nose to spite his face" and one of my greatest fears was 'if' he changed his mind once he'd*

*moved out, would he 'allow' himself to return and swallow his pride - and I voiced this fear to him. In the end, I just had to get through each day the best I could and do what felt right for me."*

(end of one person's sharing)

## Should I go or stay?

*Question:*

*I do not know how to get out of the state of ambivalence—to go or stay. Can you help?*

Peggy's Response:

Many people are ambivalent about what they want when they first find out about a spouse's affair. But, as I've pointed out in the past, as unpleasant and anxiety-producing as it is to be uncertain about whether to go or stay, it is wise NOT to rush this decision. It's important to wait until after you have overcome the initial trauma and gotten as much information and perspective about affairs as possible.

Only after the emotions subside enough to allow for more clear thinking will you be capable of making a good decision. Any final decision that is made on an "emotional" basis is likely to be difficult to "live with." But by giving yourself enough time to feel confident that you can live with the decision (regardless of how it turns out), you may avoid forever "second-guessing" yourself as to whether you made the "right" decision.

One of the reasons it takes time to make a good/rational decision is that the decision needs to be based on the prospects for the future of the relationship, not determined by what happened in the affair. Regardless of who the affair was with or how long it lasted, etc., the best way to decide about the future is to do a clear-eyed assessment of the prospects for the future of the marriage.

Here's an excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth* that focuses on some of the factors involved in making an assessment of the possibilities for 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? Changes of this kind don't happen overnight, but unless there's an indication of movement in this direction, there's little hope for developing a good marriage."*

In the final analysis, each person is responsible for making their own decision (regardless of the opinions of friends, family, professionals, or the general public) because they have to live with the choice they make. It takes strength and clear-headedness for a person to independently assess the situation and do whatever is best for them.

So the ambivalence that's expressed in this letter is not necessarily bad; in fact, it's preferable to the impulse to decide too quickly. Any hasty decisions are likely to complicate the difficult process of coping with the aftermath of an affair. A person who takes time to recover some sense of emotional stability before deciding their future will be more likely to make a satisfying decision.

As for when you know for sure...there's no magic moment when you know; it's a process of gradually feeling more and more sure—until one day you no longer have the same nagging question in your head. When that time comes, you'll know it. In the meantime, it simply can't be rushed.

## Waiting 7 years to leave!?

*Question:*

*I see that most sites like this encourage parties to stay together after an affair is discovered and that really aggravates me. I tried for seven years and it was a big mistake. Should have gotten out. Divorced anyway and wasted those years.*

Peggy's Response:

This is obviously not a "question," but a comment. (It was submitted in our "Comments" form rather than as a Question.) However, it raises an issue that needs to be addressed, so I'm using this opportunity to discuss the issue of the timing of a decision about staying married vs. divorcing.

A couple of months ago, I addressed the general question of whether to go or stay—and how to go about making that decision. I pointed out the importance of being able to live with the decision (whatever it is)—which means waiting until the decision is made on a rational basis rather than an emotional one. (And this simply isn't possible to do in the immediate aftermath of learning of a spouse's affair.)

But the above question raises the specific question of *when* to make the decision. Experience has shown that those who get out too soon invariably "second-guess" themselves, wondering whether it would have made a difference had they tried longer/harder/smarter. But "too soon" is within the first year or two—*not* waiting 7 years!

There is a "window of opportunity" when the decision can best be made. That is after the initial shock has worn off and the emotions have somewhat subsided—but before you simply accommodate until one day you wake up and wonder what you're still waiting for.

There is no magic number of years, but there *is* a way to monitor whether or not you are making progress that will make it possible for the "waiting" to pay off. At any point along the way, if you still see overall progress, then it's reasonable to think things may continue to get better. But at the point where there is *no* overall progress (or where things are actually getting worse), then it's time to acknowledge that you've waited long enough.

By emphasizing the "overall" progress, I mean that you don't use a particularly good day (or week) to make the decision—and you don't use a particularly bad day (or week) to make the decision. You monitor the general improvement (or lack thereof) over time. (To reinforce the basic time I have repeatedly suggested, this usually takes at least 2 years.)

Of course, nothing about this decision or the process of making it is easy or guaranteed to be "right." But you certainly give yourself the best chance of making a "good" decision by following these general guidelines.

Finally, here's an excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth* about 'Living with the Decision.

*There isn't any right or wrong decision to make about staying married or getting a divorce, only the one that works for each individual personally. Two different people may have the same set of conditions but make different decisions—and in each case it might be the best decision for each of them. That's because people have differing values and priorities about factors that have an impact on their decision.*

For instance, two men who are considering divorce might each have the same income and the same number of children and other family responsibilities; but one might choose to stay in the marriage and one decide to leave. One man may value his life with his children above all else,

whereas another man may never have felt very comfortable with his role as a father and have no problem adjusting to the idea of not living with his kids. As to money, one man may value a more luxurious lifestyle and be unwilling to shift to the lower standard of living a divorce would bring, whereas another man may be very "basic" and prefer the simple life without regard to outward appearances. Whatever a person's decision, we need to respect it and respect them for having the courage to make it.

(end of excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*)

## When the person who had an affair won't decide between spouse and third party?

I receive a *lot* of questions from people who are a “limbo” kind of situation—when the person who had an affair won't make a decision.

Almost all of the questions are from wives whose husbands won't decide. (The last question, #16, uses the word "spouse" instead of "husband," so can't be sure about that one.) This is reflective of the fact that when the person who had an affair remains undecided, it's usually the husband who doesn't want to give up either his wife/family or his affair partner. When the affair of a married woman is discovered by her husband, she usually feels a need to decide pretty quickly, being far more uncomfortable with this triangle situation.

(Note that following the 16 questions from spouses, I'm also including two questions from married men who are the ones unable to decide.)

### Question #1:

*The "man in the middle" (between his wife and the other woman) is obviously not too uncomfortable where he's placed himself or else he'd do something about it. Outwardly he doesn't seem to be too concerned about the two women's feelings. What suggestions do you have for the wife/family for helping him to realize the unfairness to both women and how incredibly selfish he's being with his indecision?*

### Question #2:

*My husband has been having a relationship with another woman for a year and half. He tells me that there was no sexual acts but they have become emotionally attached, he had decided to no longer see her but he seems so unhappy. I love my husband, I feel confused as what I should expect or what to do.*

### Question #3:

*Our marriage over the past 40 years was like a fairy tale - we were the 'perfect' family. Now he has a mistress younger than our oldest child. He wants me to remain as his 'best friend' - she doesn't mind and wants to be friends, too. I asked why either of them would think I'd want to associate with the two people who had brought me the worst 15 months of my life. He looked shocked. I want him back as my husband and best friend. But if I'm not his friend, doesn't that lessen my chances?*

### Question #4:

*I've given my husband a copy of the question/answer about guilt from a week or so ago - he says he'll read it. I doubt he'll share it with her. There are several q/a that she could derive some insight from, but how do I get them to her? I'm concerned that any contact with her would make her more determined. We don't know any of the same people as she lives about 320mi away. Do you think her friends there are asking why he doesn't move there with her?*

### Question #5:

*In one of the questions this week the wife said she'd been trying to be 'passive and neutral' when she interacts with her husband. I can't seem to get past hurt, anger, and frustration and think I need a better way to interact with him when I see him. Is this a good way to 'be'? If so, how does one 'be' passive and neutral without sounding like they don't care what the husband does? I know 'pitiful' is unattractive, so how should I 'be'?*

*Question #6:*

*It's been almost 2 years since he moved out, taking very little with him. Most of his clothes and all of his tools are here (he has a woodshop that Bob Villa would like). I've asked him several times to come get his stuff. He says he will but then he doesn't. Should I take this as a 'good thing' or believe what my friends say - that "he's using the house/garage for free storage" - there's not room in his small apartment. What do you think I should do? The affair continues. I want him home.*

*Question #7:*

*After 13 mos. she 'sent' him back home to resolve things with me; but with a pact to still 'talk' daily. Consequently, after 4 couples therapy sessions where he lied, and answered my questions with lies, he said he couldn't do it and went back (as tho he left) to her. He saw this as 'the honorable' thing to do, because it wasn't 'right' for him to be with me as long as he has feelings for her. To me, this was cruel and vicious after everything else. What should I do to save my marriage?*

*Question #8:*

*He was the perfect husband and father for 33 yrs. Then he hooked up with her and began to lie and be willing to be dishonest. The change was phenomenal. He says he might not ever be that man again. He's lied to her and she caught him several times. I'm trying to 'hold together' my life and our 33 yr investment; she only has an 18 mo investment. Why is she willing to accept a man who is being so much less than he can be? Doesn't she see this? Doesn't she see what she's asking him to give up?*

*Question #9:*

*She's 37, 35 yrs his junior and seemingly desperate. She's flattered that he paid her some attention; he's flattered with her attention, too. She feels more loved BECAUSE he's willing to give up everything for her, meaning she's more important than his wife, children, family, home, investments, etc. He's losing everything, including his self-respect, and she's not the least bit concerned about what it is costing him or our family. Do all mistresses feel this way?*

*Question #10:*

*My husband's mistress lives 350 mi away but he drives to see her every other weekend. Throughout the week he comes home and does minor repairs (he's retired), cuts grass, maintains the pool, etc. She apparently has no problem with this nor the fact that he's become a liar (to both of us) since he started seeing her (she knew him before). You've said it usually lasts anywhere from 6mo to 2yrs. It's been 19mos. What would be a reasonable guess about how long a relationship like this will last?*

*Question #11:*

*All of our family, including our 3 grown children, have ostracized him for what he's doing by going against his values and morals and the ones he taught them to uphold. He's made some drastic changes and has lost a lot. Do you believe he will ever want to be the man of integrity who was so admired by his peers and family? He said it doesn't matter what people, including his family, think. The man I've known for 35 years couldn't bear the shame. Where did he go and will he return?*

*Question #12:*

*I've shared a lot of the things you've written with my husband. He's been involved with someone over a year. He says it's not a fantasy, it's real, and he didn't know that something was missing in his life until he found her. And now that he's 'found' whatever this is, he doesn't want to be without it ever again. I think I've read everything you've ever written; I find a lot of hope in the things you write, but his words take it away. Should I divorce him or let the emotional abuse continue?*

*Question #13:*

*Does every man who's involved in an affair lose all of their logic and reasoning ability? My husband admits his is gone. He won't leave her but doesn't want to give up his family and home to be with her full time. He understands that he's being unfair to both of us and he's sorry. I've given him several of your previous questions and he says he's reading them. What makes such an intelligent man become such an idiot?*

*Question #14:*

*I have labeled my husband's affair as an addiction - not to HER, but to the thrill of having something new, younger, and available for only a small price - his integrity. He has shunned all of his responsibilities to our family, is spending our savings, and when deprived of her company becomes desperate - he will lie, cheat or steal to be with her. What can I do to help him recognize this? Will he ever figure it out on his own?*

*Question #15:*

*How do you 'nudge' someone who is in the approach-avoidance stage to make a decision without an ultimatum? I keep hoping that she will get tired of the limbo and insist - after 18 months she's not. What other decision does the wife have to make other than deciding to wait or deciding to divorce? He knows I do not want a divorce; I am staying busy and doing things that have nothing to do with him. I'm out of ideas.*

*Question #16:*

*It seems that those who are in an affair and get caught by their spouse have to decide who to be with. What is it about the person who has an affair that always has to be in a relationship? It's as if that person is on perpetual rebound and never taking a step out of the box and enjoying some life moments being free of a relationship. That is where I am after my divorce 2 years ago due to spouses' 4-yr affair with my friend. And I do not even want to be in a relationship yet or ever.*

*(I also received 2 questions from married men involved in a triangle. Note that since they describe similar situations, it could be that one man sent in both questions.)*

*Question #1 from husband still involved:*

*My affair began as a business friendship. I'm my mid 60's and she is half my age. She reminds me a lot of my wife when she was 21. This girl makes me feel that I can do anything. My wife thinks I'm trying to re-live our first few years together and using my 'friend' to feel younger. I know I like the way I feel when I'm with her and nothing else seems to matter. I'm stuck. I can't move back home and can't move in with her. Is there a solution to keep there from being any more hurt?*

*Question #2 from a husband still involved:*

*I'm having an affair with a younger woman and it's wonderful. I love my wife of 30 years but love her, too. I know the 'right' thing to do but can't seem to do it. I didn't go looking for an affair - it just happened. Now I've put these two women I love in a terrible spot. I've read several*

*of your answers and understand why I need to end my affair. Where do I get the strength to do it? I've never felt so weak.*

Peggy's Response:

The number of the questions about this issue indicates that this is an extremely prevalent problem. I suspect that most people who haven't "been there" assume that it's always the "hurt spouse" who has difficulty making a decision about the future of the marriage. But all too often, the one who had an affair is the one unable/unwilling to decide what they want.

So this leaves the spouse (as mentioned earlier, usually the wife) in limbo, feeling powerless to do anything. I can't provide actual prescriptions for the individual questions because there is NO specific thing she can do to force him to make a decision. She can only do some things that may ease the strain she feels and allow her to better cope—and may possibly lead him to rethink his situation.

For instance, one of the most difficult aspects is the sense of isolation that comes from feeling stuck in this situation. And while it doesn't provide any concrete help in coping, it does sometimes alleviate some of the sense of being alone when you recognize that many others are in the same situation (as is obvious from the above questions) and that there is no easy solution.

One way to better deal with this limbo period is to openly share the facts of the situation with all of the relevant people in your life. It's best not to "cover" for him or to present a façade of things being other than they are—including just how difficult this is for you. (Part of his ability to delay a decision is his rationalizing that it's not as bad or as hard on you as it really is. So the more people there are who fully know how difficult it is, the better in helping him face the reality.) This is *not* to "punish" him; only to allow for the natural consequences of his actions rather than diluting them by covering for him.

You might strengthen your own clarity about the fact that he's dealing with fantasy (delusion), not reality. It might help to familiarize yourself with "reality therapy" as a way of understanding his behavior and what's involved in helping people recognize what they're doing. (Obviously he is not operating out of a rational mindset, but is letting his emotions dictate his behavior.) One of the best books ever on this concept is "Reality Therapy" by Dr. William Glasser. It is a classic, and if not found in bookstores, it is available through [amazon.com](http://amazon.com)).

If you are strongly committed to working toward rebuilding the marriage, you'll need to accept the incredible patience this takes. (As I've said in the past, most affairs last from 6 months to 2 years, although they can go on much longer under certain circumstances like limited contact.) In fact one of the key factors in men waking up to the reality of the situation only happens when their relationship with the other woman becomes familiar/routine. Unfortunately, many men don't fully recognize that they don't want the other woman until they have lived with her for awhile and gotten a taste of reality instead of the fantasy of an affair. (Moving in together takes the "bloom off the rose")

Finally, it's important not to let *anyone* dictate what you do (or don't do) about this limbo situation. But whatever you do, it's important to "take care of yourself." It's clear that you don't have the power to control (or perhaps even influence) your husband's behavior. So I want to close by repeating an excerpt from a book I have quoted in the past.

The title of the book is *The Passion Trap*. (I highly recommend the purchase of this book. If you can't find it in bookstores, it IS available through [amazon.com](http://amazon.com)). The book includes an excellent list of ways to focus on yourself in the face of being unable to control another person.

Excerpt from *The Passion Trap* by Dean C. Delis:

Note that this book is NOT about affairs. However the following tips (for the person who is in a "one-down" position in the relationship) are applicable for someone struggling with a spouse's affair.

1. *Be good to yourself.*
2. *Get a grip on reality. An emotional crisis clouds your perceptions—and when you're not thinking straight, it's hard to act in your best interests. You tend to catastrophize, self-sabotage, and exaggerate the other's behaviors.*
3. *Have brave new thoughts. Think of how YOU can change, don't be afraid to think of creative ways to save a relationship.*
4. *Create healthy distance. Keep busy, don't neglect other areas of life, build new strengths, do things on your own that have nothing to do with the other person.*
5. *Explain what you're doing. Don't try to "pretend" to your partner. Let them know what you're doing.*
6. *Face your fears of distance. Write down your biggest fear of distance, reframe your fear in nonaccusatory terms, and tell your partner how you're now re-thinking these fears.*
7. *Define your limits. This is not an ultimatum, but a way of bringing a resolution instead of continuing indefinitely in the one-up, one-down situation.*

More details from this book:

Also, this week I received the following letter from someone who had read my earlier posting of the above excerpt from "The Passion Trap" and asked some additional questions about some of the points listed above:

#3 - need ideas for 'creative ways' to save relationship.

#4 - do what sort of 'things on your own'?

#6 - why tell your partner?

#7 - limits like 'you have to choose because you can't have both'? If setting limits hasn't brought a resolution in the past 18 months, then why expect that it would now? Perhaps I don't understand what is meant by 'limits'?

Re: #3: Get a grip on reality (think of creative ways to save a relationship):

A good way to save a relationship is Not being afraid to break up. Your neediness and desperation will be damaging to your goal of regaining your partner's love and your fear of losing your grip on your partner will keep you from engaging in activities outside the relationship. Paradoxically, the braver you are about taking healthy, jeopardizing risks in your relationship, the greater the chance you'll save it. Also, use your anger as a source of strength by telling yourself, 'Dammit, I'm sick and tired of being one-down! It's time to become the person I want to be in the relationship.'

Re: #4: Create healthy distance (do things on your own):

Your greatest chance for strengthening your relationship lies in striving to shift your emotional energy away from it. Reclaim your strengths by avoiding letting your worries about the relationship sidetrack you because it is damaging to you and to the relationship. Ask yourself what activities you used to enjoy before the problems developed and what are your personal goals outside of the relationship. Note: The goal of healthy distance is not to act distant around your

partner. In fact, don't act in any premeditated way. Rather, act however you feel like acting. Finally, don't try to manipulate your partner because playing games tends to be transparent and can backfire because it's so easy to see through them.

Re: #6: Face your fears of distance (tell your partner how you're now re-thinking the fears):

Discuss your fears and your new 'reframed' view of them with your partner. Be firm, however. Tell your partner that if he does what you fear most, he's choosing to jeopardize and possibly end your relationship. If/when your partner opposes and resists your healthy distance efforts, don't condemn him. The chances are good that your very resistant partner needs to control you out of a deep-seated insecurity.

Re: #7: Define your limits:

(Note that this point is talking about setting limits for yourself—not limits on the other person.)

Give healthy distance a good try for at least several months. Communicate in no-fault terms about what you want from the relationship. If after all your efforts you still feel emotionally unfulfilled...have a nitty-gritty, no-fault talk with your partner. While an ultimatum is the ultimate way to define your personal limits, they should be given sparingly and with caution, to avoid the 'boy who cried wolf' syndrome. They should not be used to gain leverage in a relationship or to frighten. Before using an ultimatum, have a clear sense of what you'll no longer tolerate in the relationship, refusing to adopt a blaming attitude toward your partner. Make use of the ultimatum's strength to invite change - for both of you.

Finally, this is the longest Response I ever expect to post. But I felt it was warranted due to the overwhelming desire for information related to being in this limbo situation. I hope you will keep in mind that it's impossible to provide specific answers to the many variations of any particular question.

So it's essential if you want to determine the best path for yourself through this issue (or any other problem related to a partner's affair) that you need to do a *lot* of reading about affairs in particular and relationship dynamics in general. As you know, I sell a number of my own books (in PDF format) here on the Website. And I have posted my reviews of a lot of books by other authors that can be helpful. So I encourage you to do a lot of reading in order to find your own answers.

## How often does an affair lead to divorce?

*Question:*

*What percentage of marriages affected by affairs end in divorce?*

Peggy's Response:

Since affairs are so shrouded in secrecy, this is an almost-impossible assessment to make with any accuracy. People tend to think that most people get a divorce when they learn of a spouse's affair—which may be due to the fact that most people say they would get a divorce if their spouse ever had an affair. However, what people say in advance of facing this issue is very different from what actually happens.

Based on the responses from the 1,083 people who completed by my Survey on Affairs, 76% (of both men and women) reported that they are currently married and living with the spouse who had affair(s). This is just one survey, but it is representative of what I have heard from other professionals. The general public doesn't necessarily have this same perspective because often they only hear about an affair if the marriage ends—since many people who do stay married never disclose the fact that there has been an affair.

When someone says, "No one in my family has had an affair" or "None of my friends has had an affair," it's more likely that it has happened—but the secrecy surrounding this issue means that they just don't know about it. So people generally don't realize the prevalence of affairs and therefore don't know about the large numbers of people who do stay married after an affair.

The bottom line is that at the point that an affair is discovered, most people don't just get a divorce "on principle." There are many considerations, and most people try to save the marriage and see whether this crisis can be used to form a better, more honest relationship. Ironically, it would be easier for more couples to feel optimistic about this possibility if there were less secrecy about affairs. We talk a lot about famous people's affairs (or about affairs in books/movies/TV), but we fail to talk openly about our own experiences.

James and I were unusual in "going public" about our experience so many years ago. And while it does have some drawbacks (in that people don't "understand"), it can also help de-stigmatize this experience and get it out in the open where there can be more information, understanding and perspective about the whole issue. More openness would also help with recovery—in that anything that feels too awful to talk about may feel too awful to get over.

So while I believe that most marriages remain intact following an affair, I believe more marriages would survive if there were less secrecy about this issue. If people knew just how many others have survived and were still married, it would help them recognize the potential for overcoming this devastating experience and using this crisis to re-build the marriage into something better. Also, less secrecy might lead to fewer affairs—since those who might otherwise have an affair might be more likely to consider the consequences when they can no longer count on the secrecy to protect them from being held accountable.

## How will I know if divorce is right for me?

*Question:*

*I found out 5 months ago that my husband had been in an 18-month affair with a married woman. We are 23 years married with 4 children. How will I know if divorce is the right decision for me?*

*Peggy's Response:*

I addressed the issue of "whether to stay or leave" just a few weeks ago—as it related to the impact on kids. But it's a question many people consider when they learn of their spouse's affair, so I'll focus on the larger issue of when and why to consider divorce.

The first thing to know about deciding whether or not divorce is right for you personally is that you will not be capable of making a rational decision in the early stages of dealing with the discovery of a spouse's affair. The emotions are far too much in control to make such a life-changing decision. Also, a decision to divorce should be made based on the "prospects for the future" of the marriage rather than on the specific situation surrounding the affair (how many, how long, who with, etc.)

Here are some "guidelines" for deciding (excerpted from *The Monogamy Myth*)

1. *Make your own decision (regardless of what others think).*
2. *Do not rush the decision.*
3. *Get as much information as possible about your own situation and about affairs in general.*
4. *Consider the emotional piece of this, but realize it's only one part, not the sole basis for a good decision.*
5. *Consider the practical factors involved (including money, kids, and other relevant issues), but realize the importance of balancing these concerns with the more personal, emotional needs.*
6. *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? Changes of this kind don't happen overnight, but unless there's an indication of movement in this direction, there's little hope for developing a good marriage.*

Here's another excerpt from the chapter on the "Marriage/Divorce Dilemma" in *The Monogamy Myth*.

*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.*

*For instance, one woman kept thinking of crazy things like, if she got a divorce and they sold the house, the dog would have to be put to sleep because you can't have dogs in apartments. She would get so upset by that fact that she couldn't get beyond it to even begin to cope with the possible effect on the children. A person in this state is clearly not prepared to make a rational decision about the future of their marriage.*

*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.*

*One of the reasons for the ambivalence about making this decision is because there's so much at stake. On the one hand, there's often a strong impulse to leave when a partner has an affair. But on the other hand, most people have invested themselves—their time, their energy, and their dreams—in this relationship, and they don't want to give it up without being sure they're not making a mistake. Even if the relationship is less than they had hoped, they see no guarantee of finding a better one to replace it. And, on a subconscious level, most people fear the unknown; so staying until they're sure about leaving seems the most reasonable thing to do.*

*This ambivalence is not necessarily bad; in fact, it's preferable to the impulse to decide too quickly. Any hasty decisions are likely to complicate the difficult process of coping with the aftermath of an affair. A person who takes time to recover some sense of emotional stability before deciding their future will be more likely to make a satisfying decision.*

(end of excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*)

So the bottom line is that I urge people dealing with affairs to avoid even considering divorce until they can make the decision based on "rational thinking" rather than "emotions." And that can't happen until there has been a considerable amount of time to assimilate this new information and see what's possible for the future.

It's also important to appreciate that it's not just the decision itself that is important; it's also how you live with the decision. So even if you eventually decide to divorce, the time and effort to try to salvage the marriage will not be wasted—because I've found that people who give up too soon forever "second-guess" themselves, wondering "could I/should I." But those who wait until they can feel confident that they have tried everything reasonably possible for as long as reasonably possible are the ones who are then capable of making a decision they can comfortably live with.

[For more about making this decision, see the articles posted on the website titled: "Deciding whether to stay married or get a divorce" and "Why does a person stay with a spouse who has had an affair?"](#)

## Is there hope for reconciliation?

*Question:*

*My wife revealed an affair with her boss. She moved into her own apartment, and is continuing the affair. I expect this affair will end eventually, but you don't seem to offer any advice for people in my position. 14 years we've been together, 4 emotional flings in the last four years, no kids.*

**Peggy's Response:**

There are a number of issues in this question that deserve attention:

As for whether the affair will end eventually...

It's highly likely that it will end—since it's rare for an "affair" to turn into a permanent relationship. The length of affairs is usually between 6 months and 2 years. While there are exceptions, most of the time the fascination with the other person wanes as the initial "chemistry" fades and as they experience more of the affair partner as a "real person in the real world" (as opposed to the fantasy image in the beginning).

Regarding whether I offer any help for people in this kind of situation...

While there is nothing currently posted on my site dealing specifically with this situation, I have written about it in the past and will include some of that below. (I will also provide links to books that focus on it, including M. Weiner-Davis's mentioned above.)

I do believe that if someone wants to rebuild their marriage, then it's reasonable to continue to be hopeful that this can happen. But I believe it's wise while "hoping for the best" to also "prepare for the worst." This means not simply standing by waiting to see what the spouse decides, but getting on with your own life by focusing on whatever other things/people/interests you have personally. This often means recovering pursuits that you have dropped or let slide while you "stand by," waiting for the future. (Near the end of this posting, I'm sharing an overview of a story that illustrates how this can happen.)

One of the points that stands out in the above question is the fact that (despite his wife having moved into her own apartment and continuing the affair), he seems to be just standing by waiting to see what she ultimately decides. This is especially problematic in this particular situation where the wife has had 4 emotional flings in the last four years, raising concerns about future stability even if she does decide to return to the marriage.

### Overview of a Personal Story

I want to share (with her permission) my personal correspondence with a woman who has been dealing with this kind of dilemma for some time now—and is handling it in one of the most sensible ways I've seen. (The roles are reversed in this instance where it's the man who had an affair and moved out, and the wife who is waiting to see how things turn out.) But she's doing far more than just "waiting;" she is actively involved in setting guidelines and parameters.

I first spoke with this woman 10 months ago, at a time when they were trying to work out their relationship following the disclosure of his affair. I asked her to follow-up in a year's time to let me know how things were going...cautioning her that this takes time to resolve and not likely to know how it will "turn out" for quite awhile.

Three months later, she wrote, saying:

*He decided to go with the other woman (although he will not be living with her) to see if he could make it work. We left it with me wishing him luck on everything and telling him that he's still deep in my heart, that I cannot be nor do I desire to be with another man. He said he still loved me, and I am in his heart, and that our many years did mean something, but he felt that he has to do this and do it right.*

I responded:

*Your description of the situation after 3 months is evidence of why I ask people to let me know after one year how things are going. His "going with the other woman to see if he could make it work" is still an "in-process" stage—not an indication of the way this will finally "turn out."*

She immediately responded, saying:

*I don't think this will pan out with them either, because the decision he made was based on a reaction, but I guess he has to find out whatever it is he has to find out. If time were to bring us together again, I would want this resolved in him, rather than to have him always wondering "what if" (even Leonard Bernstein left his wife of many years to live as a gay couple with a man, and life brought him back to his wife). I know I don't have to tell you it's a horrible feeling to give so many years to someone and have this happen. Last fall after things blew up with her we were doing good, or at least I was. He began missing her and then flipped out when he found out she was with someone else. I don't think he made this decision with good judgment.*

I wrote back, saying:

*I'm not saying that he will want to return to you (or that you will want him if/when he does want to return), but it's highly unlikely that he will still be living with her at the end of a year.*

Another 3 months passed, and in June she wrote:

*I got actively involved in a couple of projects related to some of my personal interests, and found it was beneficial in helping me refocus for myself. In the meantime, I have not seen him since he told me he was going to try to work it out with her, but now, practically three months later, he wants to work it out with me instead. He told me I misunderstood his intentions, that he was only trying to understand what he felt and why, not necessarily "be" with her. He is looking for a counsellor to work with on his own. (She is not exactly out of the picture as they still talk, and I'm staying in my own "space" for the time being, working on what I need to work on for myself.)*

I responded:

*I want to say how pleased I am to hear that you are "going on with life." By the way, I think your activities are some of the most wonderful ones for providing a sense of aliveness and general well-being.*

## What about remarriage to the same spouse?

*Question:*

*Can you tell me, once an affair has ended, as well as the marriage - can/do those spouses, once married and now divorced, ever recommit to each other and a new marriage? Has there been anyone you have ever heard of that has divorced and remarried their spouse again? My ex had an affair - it is now ended. He and I seem to be connecting on a much more mature and compassionate level. We were together for 26 years. What do you think of remarriage to the same spouse? We did divorce quickly after the affair.*

*Peggy's Response:*

As for whether I've ever heard of anyone remarrying after divorce, the answer is yes. Even though it's rare, it has happened. And the possibility of remarriage is somewhat greater if (as mentioned above) the divorce was entered into too quickly. However, this is NOT to offer "false hope"—but just to share my perspective that remarriage is "possible."

I want to take this opportunity to say a bit more about the decision process (re: staying married or getting a divorce) following the discovery of an affair. First of all, it's very important not to "rush" the decision. This inevitably leads to second-guessing whether it was the right decision. Being able to live with whatever decision is made (over the long haul) requires taking time to consider all alternative in advance. By making a carefully considered decision in a rational way (instead of reacting to the panic of the initial shock of the affair), there's a much greater likelihood of being more confident and at peace with whatever decision you make.

Here are some thoughts (taken from ideas in *The Monogamy Myth*) about the importance of timing in making this decision.

*“Timing is one of the most crucial factors in determining the ability to live comfortably with the decision to get a divorce. If a person leaves too soon, the issues may never be fully dealt with. While the decision itself may not be wrong, there's a good possibility that making the decision before getting an understanding of what happened will leave unresolved feelings of bitterness and resentment. There may be unanswered questions and unspoken feelings that persist for years to come. Also, the impulse to leave immediately is often a reaction to the shock of a situation for which you're un-prepared.*

*But delaying the decision too long is also likely to create lasting problems. While waiting long enough to overcome the initial shock of the affair is a positive step, it's important that the time be spent actually working toward making a decision rather than becoming trapped in a strained relationship simply by failing to decide. At some point, a person may know within their heart that it's time to leave, but continue to put off the actual departure. Then they discover that they've accommodated to a situation that would have seemed intolerable had they not waited so long that it became tolerable by virtue of its familiarity.*

*In some sense, there's a "window," a period of time when it's best to leave. Having missed the prime opening, some people feel the window is forever closed. As the crisis abates and they turn their attention to other areas of life, they simply give up the idea of leaving. It's sad when people fail to leave an un-recoverable relationship—but it's unfortunate when people give up on a relationship too soon. And when that happens, it's understandable to re-think the decision and contemplate the possibility of remarriage.”*

## THERAPISTS

### How can I select a marriage counselor?

*Question:*

*What type of questions do I ask when selecting a marriage counselor?*

*Peggy's Response:*

This question represents a very smart approach to seeking counseling. Here are some of the guidelines I offer in *The Monogamy Myth*. (Each of these points has a paragraph about it in the book—but here's the general list:)

- 1. Go to a counselor who has been personally recommended by someone who has used them and whose opinion is trusted.*
- 2. Be willing to "interview" counselors or "shop around."*
3. Find a counselor who believes in honesty and encourages honest communication.
- 4. Clarify goals to find the best fit. (Honesty is only one of the issues to be resolved in terms of the goals of counseling.)*
- 5. Ask about the counselor's view of affairs as more than just a personal issue. (Beware if the counselor explains affairs ONLY in terms of personal failings/shortcomings—or wants to focus on childhood/family-of-origin issues rather than the current situation.)*
- 6. Be aware of feelings of strength or weakness that result from working with the counselor. (If a counselor is too quick with absolutes or advice, this can interfere with a person's ability to think through their situation and deal with their problems.)*
- 7. Do not be afraid to stop seeing a counselor whenever things are not going according to the general considerations listed above.*

Related to #7 above, among those who had had counseling who responded to my Survey, most of them tried more than one counselor due to frustration with the first one. (27% of those who had counseling saw one counselor, 26% of those who had counseling saw two counselors, and 48% of those who had counseling saw three or more counselors.) So it's important to do as much "up-front" work as possible in order to avoid repeated efforts.

NOW—when it comes to a specific "list of questions" to ask a counselor, the best list I have seen is the one posted on the Website of Dr. John R. Fishbein. The following list of "Possible Questions to Ask" is taken from his page titled How to Select a Therapist.

*"Possible Questions To Ask*

- 1. What is your approach to therapy?*
- 2. After providing the therapist with a brief statement about your problem, ask, "How would you go about helping me solve it?"*
- 3. How much experience and success have you had in treating my type of problem?*

4. *How long is it apt to take to solve my problem? (Of course, an exact answer is not possible, but a reasonable estimate can be expected.)*
5. *What are your goals when you provide therapy?*
6. *How much emphasis do you place on the past versus the present?*
7. *What kind of things would you expect me to be doing between our appointments?*
8. *Would you be supportive of me in my religious beliefs?*
9. *Last of all, ask for his or her opinion about any issue that are important to you that could be controversial. For example: whether or not it is worth trying to save a dying marriage; whether or not divorce is a viable option; whether or not extramarital affairs, abortion, homosexuality are acceptable, etc.*

*Remember: When you hire a therapist, he or she is your employee—you are the boss."*

## Counselors support for "talking?"

*Question:*

*I have found no one who has been through an affair for as long as my husband was having his, and destroying our family. I put him through medical school. We have been married 27 years and his affair lasted 9 that I know of. We went to counseling, but he refuses to talk about it at all.*

*Peggy's Response:*

While most affairs do last from 6 months to two years, there are also many instances where, for a variety of reasons, it can go on much longer. Sometimes it just settles into a comfortable habit, but more often the attachment is sustained longer because the two people involved in the affair are not able to be together as frequently as they wish, thus the "newness" that sustains the affair doesn't completely wear off as normally happens after a couple of years.

But the specific reason I want to focus on the above question this week is to highlight the fact that even when couples go to counseling, sometimes the counselor does not encourage and support the *talking* that is necessary if they are to effectively deal with the affair. The idea that a couple could be in counseling and the person who had the affair still "refuses to talk about it at all" demonstrates the need for more counselors to recognize the fact that it's absolutely essential to "talk about it" if there is to be any chance of rebuilding the marriage.

The spouse who had the affair almost always resists talking. As I've pointed out repeatedly, there's a general mindset among those having affairs:

*"Never tell. If questioned, deny it. If caught, say as little as possible."*

Often they actually believe it's better not to talk about it—not only to protect themselves from having to deal with the fallout, but also erroneously believing that it will make it worse on the spouse if they know details of the affair.

That thinking, however, is dead wrong. Nevertheless, it continues to be a prevalent way of thinking—even among many counselors. For instance, just last week Oprah did a show on the subject of affairs. She featured some couples who were trying to deal with affairs, then turned for a few brief comments from an "expert" who was seated in the front row. The expert said the spouse should *not* ask for details about the affair; that the only appropriate questions were "who, what, where..."

I have twice been a guest on Oprah discussing the subject of affairs, so I decided to contact the show to try to correct this misinformation.

Here is the text of my message to the Oprah Show:

*For over 20 years I repeatedly heard from people who almost always wanted to know details. And I saw a pattern develop where those who did get answers to their questions invariably recovered and rebuilt where those who did not get answers had great difficulty and often were not able to stay married—or if they did, it was a pretty deadened marriage. But I had no "proof" of this that would be convincing to counselors who still failed to support the idea of answering questions and talking through the whole situation.*

*Finally, a few years ago (at the urging of John Gottman, the famous researcher), I undertook research aimed at statistical verification of the fact that getting answers to questions is essential to recovery and rebuilding.*

*Note: Many of those of you who frequently visit this site are already familiar with the following information, but I'll continue with what I included in my message to the Oprah program.*

*I conducted a survey of 1083 spouses of people who had had affairs.*

*In response to my question: Did you want to know details about the affair(s)?*

- 7% No, I didn't want to know details*
- 31% Yes, but I wanted only general information (who, when, why)*
- 62% Yes, I wanted to know everything, including details*

*Sample of statistical analysis:*

*Hypothesis: A couple is more likely to stay married when the spouse answers their questions.*

- 59% of those who refused to answer questions were still married*
- 81% of those whose partner answered some of their questions were still married*
- 86% of those whose partner answered all their questions were still married*

*Conclusion: The responses were shown to be "statistically significant" with a p value of Note: Not only was the extent to which the spouse answered questions significantly associated with current marital status, but also the extent to which the spouse answered questions was significantly associated with personal recovery.*

*Although many people find these results to be surprising, they were not surprising to me or to the other experts who agree with me, including John Gottman, Frank Pittman, Don-David Lusterman, Dave Carder, and the late Shirley Glass.*

(This ends my message to the Oprah show.)

I encourage the person who wrote the above letter—and all of you— to read (or re-read) the information permanently posted on this site that goes into more detail as to the reasons/arguments for talking. See the following Articles:

- "The Need to Know"*
- "Talking about Affairs"*
- "Survey Report"*

## Should therapist have called for severing contact with third party?

*Question:*

*I have been told by a friend therapist that our therapist should ask my wife to end the relationship with the other person immediately (otherwise therapy is useless). To date she has refused to do this (denial) and the therapist didn't call for it. Shouldn't he have?*

Peggy's Response:

I strongly agree with those therapists (who I consider to be the real "experts" in dealing with affairs) that no effective work can be done in rebuilding the marriage until ALL contact with the third party has been severed.

This does *not*, however, mean that "therapy is useless." It just means that there's no point in focusing the therapy on "general marital issues." Rather, the focus needs to be on the affair in general and the issue of severing contact with the third party in particular. Only then is it reasonable to focus on "rebuilding the marriage."

I have written about this in the past, so I'll share some of that again now.

A failure to sever contact with the third party is understandably viewed by the spouse as ambivalence about rebuilding the marriage. So there can be no progress in working on the marriage until that happens.

Often there is a "yes, but" when talking about completely severing contact—usually regarding some unavoidable contact (like work or social circle). Well, serious situations like this call for serious actions. And those people who are serious about getting on with their lives decide to do whatever it takes, including changing jobs or moving to a different city.

Another "yes, but" may involve the other person pleading for continued contact of some kind and being hesitant to reject their pleas. However, the needs of the spouse need to be a higher priority than the needs of the third party. Caring about the well-being of the spouse means not asking them to continue to remain in limbo, sacrificing the spouse's well-being for the sake of the third party.

In addition, it is also kinder to the third party to end it quickly and cleanly rather than dragging it out. In fact, it doesn't get easier with time; it only makes it even more difficult (and messy) for everyone. The sooner contact is severed with the third party, the sooner it becomes possible for the third party to get on with their lives.

There may be a natural resistance to abruptly ending an affair. But as difficult as it may be (both physically and emotionally), the most effective way to do it is to do it quickly and completely. That's not to say it won't be painful to end contact with the third party, but the pain is over more quickly than prolonging things with a slow withdrawal. (For instance, think of the difference in quickly removing a band-aid as compared to very slowly pulling it off, one hair at a time.)

One final caution: severing contact in a complete way means:

- No final meetings to say good-bye
- No just staying in touch as friends
- No checking in occasionally to see how they're doing

It means severing *all* contact! The sooner there is complete separation, the sooner you can begin to rebuild your marriage. Anything less than this sends a strong signal that the marriage is not the priority it needs to be in order to effectively work on it. And a therapist who fails to recognize this may be working from a framework of traditional "marital therapy" rather than therapy aimed

specifically at dealing with affairs—which is why I continue to try to identify and promote those therapists who *do* focus directly on affairs.

Please refer my website for our growing list for "Locating a Therapist" who is effective in dealing with affairs. And I invite anyone who has had a good experience in therapy to send in the form on the site to "Recommend" that therapist for this list.

## Finding a therapist who understands?

*Question:*

*How do you find a therapist who understands the pain? Some have no idea.*

*Peggy's Response:*

There are some extremely good therapists working with people trying to recover from affairs. In fact, we have a page on the website that lists such therapists as recommended by people who have been helped by them. (See the link near the bottom of the home page of the website titled "Locate a Therapist.") However, there are many areas not covered by this list—so anyone who would like to recommend a therapist to add to the list can submit a Recommendation by clicking on the "Recommend" link near the top of the therapists list.

As for the sentiment expressed in the above question, this experience is far too common. In fact, when I asked for open-ended comments of "advice" for therapists from the 1,083 people who responded to my survey on affairs, one of their key messages to therapists was: "Deal with the Emotional Impact of the Affair."

So I hope that by sharing the specific words of some of those who responded, therapists will be able to recognize the importance of focusing on the pain.

Here are some of the comments that were submitted:

*"Deal with the pain, sense of loss, sense of aloneness, overwhelming sense of disillusionment. In other words, first-aid and damage-control first, please. Therapists need to look for it: the damage, the personal trauma; it may not be apparent.*

*"I was suicidal and put in the hospital, totally worthless. I felt worse than when I went in. After being betrayed by my husband, I was treated like a prisoner with no rights. Counselor was very uncaring and rough. I needed to know I would survive this great pain.*

*"I needed immediate help on the healing of the pain inflicted upon me. Every counselor or therapist I visited started with the basics of my early childhood and why something like this would hurt me. I became very frustrated during the whole experience of therapy and finally stopped after 1 year.*

*"I feel our counselor is on my husband's side; she hasn't offered or told my husband to hold on to me when I feel bad or cry. He has left the house to get away to deal with it, and to let me think about it. I feel he is just running away. When I cry he says I just want sympathy; I feel betrayed by the only person I thought I loved and loved me too. She wants to see me alone to help me deal with the situation. Well I feel she should also tell him how to help me feel wanted and loved again if he really wants to stay with me. We are the victims here but we're the ones that need help? Something sounds wrong with that to me. I'm the one that's hurting and need love, not therapy. Just help to deal with the feelings of betrayal and feeling unloved, that another younger girl took away from me.*

*"A counselor should try to help talk through the pain and let the faithful spouse realize he/she is not the only one going through this pain. It doesn't help that person but at least there is reassurance that they are not alone. I think at this same time, the counselor should make the unfaithful spouse knowledgeable about what kind of emotions follow this type of pain.*

*“Really wish my therapist had focused on how to deal with lingering anger and hurt! He focused more on my personal growth, but I needed help with the marriage more at the time.”*

Here's further evidence of the problem with many therapists—submitted by a hurting spouse who also happens to be a therapist.

*“I am a trained psychologist, familiar with personal relationship research and counseling myself, and I only now realize how little professional counselors and even marital therapists know about affairs and how to deal with them. Like friends and relatives, professional helpers essentially seem to base their interventions on stereotypes, generalizations and folk wisdom about affairs, rather than on sound research. It is extremely painful if your partner had (or has) an affair to be confronted with the axiom that “something must have been wrong with the spouse or with the relationship” to explain the affair happening. It is like blaming a rape victim for having seduced the rapist, and it feels very wrong. Dealing with the affair of a spouse is a traumatic event, and clinically is very comparable to a post-traumatic stress disorder. Professional help would probably be much more effective if counselors would deal with the issue as a trauma and draw on the literature on the treatment of PTSD, rather than to systematically regard affairs as signs of underlying relational problems.”*

By contrast—here's one of the few positive statements submitted with the survey.

*“Just having someone to listen to was great. It was nice to be able to talk with a professional who did not care if I cried, got angry, or just wanted to “chat” about everything else but the affair. My therapist was excellent and I felt that he really was able to assist me to put the entire experience in perspective.”*

NOTE: For an Overview of the Results of the Survey on Affairs—go to the section of the website for Therapists and click on the words “Survey: Help for Therapists” on the Blue Bar.

Finally, here are some tips about how to choose a therapist—excerpted from my book, *The Monogamy Myth*:

#### **HOW TO BENEFIT FROM PROFESSIONAL HELP**

*“Go to a counselor who has been personally recommended by someone who has used them and whose opinion is trusted. (This, of course, means being willing to let others know of the need to find a counselor.) This recommendation should not be the overriding determination, of course, but this “personal” impression can provide additional input to consider along with an assessment of the professional qualifications.*

*Consider the sex of the counselor. For couples, there's always the possibility of receiving counseling from a male/female team of professionals, which resolves any issue as to the sex of the counselor. If a couple goes to a single counselor, it will be beneficial if they can agree on the sex of the counselor. If not, they will need to “test” their experience with either a male or female counselor and evaluate their feelings about the experience, being open to considering the other alternative. If a person is going to counseling alone, the decision, of course, is completely up to them. Some people feel more comfortable with a same-sex counselor while others prefer someone of the opposite sex. And still others may have no clear preference. But if the sex of the counselor is likely to affect a person's receptivity to help, they need to acknowledge this in advance and avoid any unnecessary drawbacks to the process.*

*Be willing to “interview” counselors or “shop around.” Most people are uncomfortable with the idea of questioning a professional because of their tendency to be intimidated by the professional's training and expertise. All too often, people waste time, money, and emotional*

*energy rather than question the judgment of a professional. "Second opinions" are gaining wide acceptance in the medical field, but it's still difficult for people to act on this principle, especially when dealing with an emotional issue like affairs. Nevertheless, the wide range of differences in individual needs and in professional abilities and attitudes certainly makes it wise to approach counseling in a business-like way. It's reasonable to view the first session as a time for all parties concerned to evaluate the potential for working together before committing to an ongoing relationship. Compatibility is very important to successful counseling, as is the degree of comfort with the professional and confidence in their ability to be helpful.*

*Find a counselor who believes in honesty and encourages honest communication. The first step, of course, is for the couple to determine whether they want to strive for honest communication about all aspects of this issue and to develop an honest relationship. If this is the case, then it's important to find a counselor who will reinforce this effort. Since many counselors believe there's a danger in too much honesty, this is an issue that will need to be discussed to determine whether an agreement can be reached as to the goals of counseling in this regard.*

*Clarify goals to find the best fit. Honesty is only one of the issues to be resolved in terms of the goals of counseling. A couple also need to be as clear as possible as to whether their primary goal is to stay together or to achieve the best personal recovery, regardless of whether or not that involves staying together. They should also consider whether their goal is to achieve a good understanding of what happened or to put it behind them as quickly as possible without striving for much understanding of the situation. They need to communicate their goals to the counselor to determine if the counselor is comfortable in helping them work toward achieving those goals. It's important to know if a therapist uses some particular method that is incompatible with this kind of partnership approach to treatment.*

*Ask about the counselor's view of affairs as more than just a personal issue. Since the counselor's thinking on this point may not become clear until some time into the counseling process, it may be necessary to ask about their approach. In some instances, however, there will be clues as to their thinking based on whether their guidance in exploring the situation focuses exclusively on problems within the marriage as causing the affair. As discussed earlier, most professionals tend to focus only on the personal factors involved in affairs without including an evaluation of the experience in the context of societal as a whole. A purely personal focus reinforces the idea of personal blame, whereas a societal perspective can help overcome some of the negative focus on blaming, thereby diminishing the emotional impact and increasing the ability to deal with the issues to be resolved.*

*Be aware of feelings of strength or weakness that result from working with the counselor. If a counselor is too quick with absolutes or advice, this can interfere with a person's ability to think through their situation and deal with their problems. In fact, this approach can create additional problems to add to the ones they're already trying to deal with. Also, if the counselor is critical of a person's need to talk about their feelings or to ask questions of their spouse, this can interfere with their struggle to overcome the damage to their self-esteem. The work with the counselor should have the effect of empowering a person, making them feel more confident and better able to deal with the situation, not overly dependent on the professional. It's important to listen to whatever advice professionals have to offer, but not to assume they know precisely what's best. They can give guidance, but not answers.*

*Do not be afraid to stop seeing a counselor whenever things are not going according to the general considerations listed above. If there is basic disagreement about some of these issues,*

*it's important to discuss the areas of disagreement with the counselor to determine whether they can be resolved, or to acknowledge that there isn't a good fit in this particular counseling effort. With the enormous differences in individuals and in counselors, it often requires a "trial and error" period to find the best possible fit. There is no need to feel a sense of "failure" (either as the client or as the professional) when this happens. Both parties need to be willing to stop at any point, after the first session or the tenth. It's especially important to avoid a long-term association that creates dependence without demonstrating progress in becoming more capable of functioning without professional help.*

(end of excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*)

## What can I expect from a therapist?

*(Below are a few of the many questions I've received within the past few months about issues related to counseling.)*

### Question #1

*What can I expect from a therapist? Is he/she there to listen only or actively participate in conversations? I understand that a therapist cannot tell you what to do, but do they analyze things and help you to figure out why you do the things you do? I am seeing my second therapist and I still do not feel satisfied that she is helping me or giving me the skills to deal with the issues of my husbands infidelity. I don't think I can re-hash everything with a third person.*

### Question #2

*How do you know you have found a good counselor? How long should you go to a counselor when an affair has taken place in your marriage?*

### Question #3

*I have seen a therapist regarding my recent discovery of my husbands 9 affairs over the 27 years of our marriage. She told me that "your husband is what we call a 'tom cat' and it is highly unlikely that he will change this pattern of behavior." Do you agree?*

### Question #4

*If the person who had the affair suffers with low self esteem and self worth, how much counseling does this person need? Does this person need to seek counseling for years and years in order for deep, rooted issues can be revealed?*

### Question #5

*About 6 months have passed. I recently read a book that emphasizes leftover issues from childhood as part of the "push" into an affair. Have you read about this and what do you think of it?*

### Question #6

*It has been 6 months since I discovered my husband's romantic affair with a woman he met at an out of state conference. We have been in therapy for about 5 months with a psychologist we had seen some years earlier and were familiar with. However on my last visit she told me that I should have sensed that he was having an affair and could have done something to prevent it. I did sense something was wrong, but what could I have done to prevent it?*

### Question #7

*I live recently experienced my spouse having an affair. This affair re-ignited 11 years after she was alleged to have had an affair with the same man. I went to counseling but I do not feel like the counselor grasped my feelings or even has helped me in dealing with my feelings.*

### Question #8

*My husband and I are currently recovering from his affair. Although my husband has recommitted to our marriage, he has not apologized for the affair or the hurt he has caused me. He has also never admitted that what he did was wrong and that he would never do it again. Our counselor has advised me not to bring up the past and by insisting to talk about the affair will*

*only damage our recovery process. I feel for me to fully recover I need to hear my husband acknowledge how much he has hurt me.*

Peggy's Response:

I have come to recognize (after hearing similar stories for over 20 years) that finding effective therapy/counseling in dealing with a spouse's affair is a significant problem for a great many people. While effective counseling can be a wonderful benefit, ineffective counseling can make the situation even worse. So I now focus a great deal of my effort on trying to collect information about which therapeutic practices are helpful—and which are not.

In fact, I've spent a lot of time during the past couple of years analyzing and organizing the results of my survey on affairs into a book titled "Help for Therapists (and their Clients)." It can now be purchased as an eBook in PDF format for immediate download in the Bookstore on my website.

I've also posted a "View Sample" link to a pdf page that provides:

- The Table of Contents of the 119-page book.
- An overview of the goals/methods of the survey.
- The statistical analyses of 2 of the items analyzed.
- Responses to 2 of the 35 multiple-choice questions in the survey.
- My commentary on each of the 2 sets of responses.
- The first of the 12 major points from the "Advice to therapists from the respondents"
- The actual quotes that were submitted related to this first point of "Advice."

Since this book provides not only the conclusions from the survey questions but the actual compelling voices of the many people who contributed, I do hope that many therapists (and their clients) will read this eBook.

Part of my effort to help people find effective counseling is to add a page to the website specifically for Locating a Therapist. This is currently a brief beginning list, but I hope those of you who know of a therapist/counselor who is effective in dealing with affairs will use our form to Recommend a therapist to be added to the list. I hope it will eventually provide an extensive listing that will be of invaluable benefit to all those (like the ones who wrote the above questions) who seek to find the professional help they need to recover from this devastating experience.

Also, some good information about seeking a therapist has been compiled by Dr. John R. Fishbein and presented in his article titled: How to Select a Therapist. (You can find a link to this page on my website under the "Links" section under the "Marriage" category.) In it, he lists the Characteristics of an Effective Therapist as well as providing a list of potential questions to ask before choosing a therapist. He encourages you to interview at least three therapists before you select one.

## Questions from counselors?

(Occasionally I receive questions from counselors, so I'm posting one of them now.)

*Question:*

*I counseled a couple for the first time where the wife had her second affair 6 months ago. She says it does no good to tell her husband who the affair was with since they are in the same small community. I feel this continues the pattern of hiding information about the affair from the spouse, but have not said so. What do you think?*

Peggy's Response:

It has become crystal clear over the years that when there's a refusal to reveal information that the spouse specifically wants to know, this damages the ability of the spouse to recover and makes it extremely difficult to rebuild the relationship. (While this doesn't automatically mean the marriage must end, since some people do remain married under these circumstances, it's likely to be a deadened, meaningless marriage.)

It's not that any specific piece of information per se is so critical, but the unwillingness to provide whatever information the hurt spouse requests just adds insult to injury. If the information didn't exist, it wouldn't be so frustrating and demeaning. But knowing your partner has information that they simply refuse to give you discounts the legitimacy of your need to have your questions answered. For more on this, see the article under the "Articles about Affairs" section of the website titled "The Need to Know."

I have consistently heard this same story for over 20 years, and finally undertook a study to explore the correlation between answering questions and recovery and rebuilding. The results (based on responses from 1,083 people whose spouses had affairs) verified this experience.

Here are the responses to one of the questions in the survey:

Did you want to know details about the affair(s)?

7% - No, I didn't want to know details

31% - Yes, but I wanted only general information (who, when, why)

62% - Yes, I wanted to know everything, including details

This week's question specifically addresses whether to share "who the affair was with"—which is part of the basic information (who, when, why). As shown above, the overwhelming majority want details about the affair, and a full 93% want to at least know "who."

In the statistical analysis of the survey, it was found that:

--The amount the affair was discussed with the spouse and the extent to which the spouse answered questions were significantly associated with the current marital status and quality of the marriage.

--The amount the affair was discussed with the spouse and the extent to which the spouse answered questions were significantly associated with recovery.

Here's an example of specific data:

--59% of those who refused to answer questions were still married

--81% of those whose partner answered some of their questions were still married

--86% of those whose partner answered all their questions were still married

For more about the results of the study, see the article listed hear the bottom of the home page of the website titled “Survey Report.

## REBUILDING THE MARRIAGE

### How can I make sense out of what happened?

#### *Question:*

*I just can't understand how this happened. And even though he seems to be trying, he can't really explain it either. How can I recover when I can't make any sense out of what happened?*

#### Peggy's Response:

Unfortunately, nothing that anyone can say will completely satisfy the need to "make sense out of what happened"—because having affairs is not something that makes rational sense. It's much more an emotional experience—getting caught up in *only* focusing on the moment while ignoring the possible long-term consequences.

In fact, once the affair is discovered and has ended, the people involved often don't know for sure just what they were thinking—or what they intended. It's more likely that a person can accurately answer questions as to what they did—(that is, if they're willing to do so). But it's much less likely that they can accurately explain what they were thinking or feeling at that time. Of course, it's a positive sign if a spouse is willing to try to describe their thinking and feeling—but it still may not be very satisfactory.

So it makes sense to acknowledge and appreciate whatever efforts a spouse makes to explain why it happened and to answer questions, but it usually takes a long time for both people to come to the point of "accepting" that this actually happened. ("Accepting" doesn't mean it's "OK." It just means finally "acknowledging" that it really happened—as opposed to constantly just "wishing it hadn't happened.") Part of the difficulty of dealing with affairs is that it's so hard to stop thinking in terms of "what if..." or "if only" and finally accepting the reality of the situation. As I said, this takes time, but until this point is reached, little real recovery can take place.

It's understandable that everyone wants to rush through this painful period—and get to the point that they feel it's "understood" and "settled." But it simply can't be rushed. It takes time *and* hard work to integrate the facts of this experience into our lives in order to recover from it. So an ongoing effort to communicate honestly about what happened is the best path to finally overcoming the pain and devastation—and recovering.

## Why would he get mad at me when he was having the affair?

*Question:*

*During the time of my husband's affair, I often found myself on the receiving end of much "resentment" on his part. He would often verbally tear me down and make me feel inadequate. As a result, I find myself questioning his behavior. Why would he get mad at me when he was having the affair?*

Peggy's Response:

On the surface, it seems strange that a person having an affair would display "resentment" and/or anger toward their spouse who is NOT having an affair—but this kind of behavior turns out to be quite common.

There are probably a wide range of reasons for this behavior. Some of the more obvious ones are:

1. It may help them create a certain distance between themselves and their spouse—which they think will help protect them from being discovered.
2. It may help them somehow "justify" the affair if they can convince their spouse (and themselves) that they're "not getting along"—even though they are the ones creating the friction.
3. It may help them feel better about themselves if they highlight (and exaggerate) whatever shortcomings they see in their spouse—by loudly and forcefully voicing some of the normal complaints any person may have about their spouse.

In fact, if someone suddenly (and seemingly without cause) begins "finding fault" with their spouse and constantly complaining about everything they do—this may be a clue that they are having an affair. It seems that when a person has 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, if they can shift the attention to the behavior of their spouse, they think maybe it will deflect attention from their own behavior. Frankly, it's often due to a lack confidence in their own integrity that causes this kind of unwarranted resentment and anger.

Having said all this, it's still up to each person to assess for themselves (based on knowing their own partner) whether any of it fits or makes sense in their situation. But these are some of the common patterns that I have observed—and some of the common thinking behind this kind of seemingly incomprehensible behavior.

## Is it normal not to reveal everything?

*Question:*

*I found out about my husband's affair 17 months ago. After 14 long months of therapy, he was summoned to "her" divorce court by "her" spouse, and my husband revealed that the 2-year affair had actually begun many years prior....by phone, etc. I don't feel like I will ever heal from the hurt. Nor can I ever trust him. Is this "normal" for the betrayer not to reveal everything until he is forced to? Did he not realize that all the progress we had made went down the tubes when he hadn't told all?*

*Peggy's Response:*

This problem is more common than we'd like to believe, and I've addressed it in the past. However, since it continues to be raised by several people submitting questions...I'll address it again.

One of the key points in my book, *The Monogamy Myth*, is that the basic attitude among those having affairs is:

*Never tell.*

*If questioned, deny it.*

*If caught, say as little as possible.*

This is almost universal. So even if/when someone is caught, they tell only what they absolutely have to tell—no more. There's a basic human survival mechanism in most of us that means we don't want to voluntarily disclose things that we know will create bad reactions—about any issue—but especially about affairs.

Of course, there are also other reasons for not "telling it all," including feelings of guilt or shame, protecting their partner's feelings, avoiding a showdown, and/or a desire to continue having affairs. But by far the most common reason is simply a belief in the basic code of silence I quoted above: "never tell" and "say as little as possible."

Since it's highly unusual for someone to provide "the whole truth" upon discovery, getting information is somewhat like "peeling an onion," removing one thin layer at a time. Typically people acknowledge only whatever has been discovered—or whatever they think might be discovered.

The fact is that very few people who learn of their partner's affairs ever learn absolutely everything. They're often afraid they don't know everything—but they're even more afraid of finding out there's more (and frankly, they often can't really imagine there's more—because they're still trying to come to grips with whatever information they *do* know).

But most people eventually want to know everything. And no matter how much progress may have been made based on incomplete answers, if/when they get more information later (either from their spouse or from outside sources) it is much worse. Unfortunately, (as described in this week's question), when more information is finally discovered later, it's like starting the whole recovery process all over again.

So the clear message for those who have had affairs is that few people fully recover without answers. So it's much better to go ahead and provide answers sooner rather than later. Not only will this allow the recovery process to be better, it will also relieve the stress for those who had affairs of continuing to carry secrets the rest of their life.

I remember clearly how James was so surprised at the relief he felt when he had told me everything and no longer had to keep secrets. Here's the way he described it in our book, *Beyond Affairs*:

*Once I disclosed my affairs to Peggy, I immediately felt a sense of relief and a renewed energy for life. This really shocked me. I'd actually been using a lot of energy to keep all that stuff in place, but I hadn't been able to admit that to myself. I can see now this was all part of the rather elaborate rationalization process that allowed me to continue feeling OK about myself. Admitting how much energy it took to maintain the charade would have opened the door to feeling it was wrong.*

*I was also pleased to discover that cleaning up this area of my life had such a positive effect on my other relationships. Being at peace with myself allowed me to relate more easily to others. The risk of disclosure in all my relationships seemed much less. I'd taken the biggest risk I thought possible and the outcome was positive. As I see it in perspective, opening up to Peggy was far and away the most significant decision I've made in my life.*

(end of excerpt from *Beyond Affairs*)

## What about the length and phases of affairs?

*Question:*

*Most experts say that an affair with deep emotional attachment and sex last anywhere between 6 months and 2 years. What are the phases the lovers are going through while the affair is going on? Also, if the husband leaves the spouse for his lover, why is it unlikely that this relation will last? Help, my husband is having an affair, which is now 5 months old and I knew it from the start.*

**Peggy's Response:**

Yes, I'm one of those experts who say that an affair usually lasts between 6 months and 2 years—unless it is discovered or there is a particularly bad experience of some kind related to it. (This is not dependent on whether there is a "deep emotional attachment and sex" as stated above; this is just the typical length of time that affairs usually last.)

There's not a great mystery about just why this is the usual duration of an affair. It's strongly related to "chemistry." We are becoming more and more aware of the fact that there is usually an initial romantic "high" to *any* new relationship, whether it's a dating relationship that eventually leads to marriage (or not)—or it's an affair. That's because for about the first 2 years of a relationship (during the initial infatuation), the people involved are being flooded by a particular set of chemicals that drive this stage. More specifically, dopamine and norepinephrine flood the system and thrive on the excitement that is typical of new relationships.

After about 2 years (or longer if it is long-distance or less contact during this time, frustrating the desire to be together)... these chemicals gradually lessen. Then there's a shift to a different set of chemicals, namely vasopressin and oxytocin—which stimulate more bonding emotions. In fact, in a long-term marriage there can be a back-and-forth interaction of the chemicals. Most extended periods are driven by the bonding chemicals, with occasional times of reinvigorated excitement driven by a shift back to the romance-inducing chemicals. For more on the nature of this bigger picture of long-lasting love, see the section on the website of [Articles about Marriage and Family](#) and read the one titled "The Full Monty."

Once an affair has gone past the point where the excitement-oriented romance is being fed by the chemicals that produce it, it loses much of its appeal and become a more real (vs. fantasy) relationship. For the first time people see it for what it is instead of the idealized image they had projected onto it. So an affair is more about the "feeling" generated in the new relationship than about the specialness of the specific "person."

Of course, people involved in affairs like to believe that there's something very special about the other person or about their connection to that person, but it's really just a connection based on chemicals. And when the chemicals stop driving it, it usually ends. This partly explains why (as mentioned in the above question), "if the husband leaves the spouse for his lover, it is unlikely that this relationship will last."

It's unfortunate that people all too often think that this first romantic "high" is true love. In fact, in many ways it's just the opposite. It's only *after* about 2 years (when the artificial high is gone) that you can begin to assess the nature/degree of real love.

For more on this, read the excerpt from our book, "Making Love Stay" that talks about "The Changing Nature of Love." (You'll find this in the description of the book in our [Bookstore](#) on the website.)

In fact, I think this understanding should be essential learning for anyone considering marriage in the first place. Anyone who makes a decision to marry in less than 2 years from the time they begin dating...does *not* know whether or not there's a real love relationship there—or whether they are simply under the spell of the initial "chemistry."

For a thorough understanding of the role of "chemistry" in relationships (whether affairs or *any* developing relationship), I recommend Helen Fisher's book, *Why We Love: The Nature and Chemistry of Romantic Love*.

## How can men compartmentalize affairs so easily?

*Question:*

*How is it that men can compartmentalize affairs so easily? Is this a character flaw and can a person stop this behavior without going to counseling? Some men will just not go to therapy. Can a wife help him through reading and open discussions? Or, is it hopeless and the spouse should just move on?*

Peggy's Response:

The issue of how men can compartmentalize affairs is one that women have a very hard time understanding. It's crazy-making when men say (as my own husband did) that "my affair had nothing to do with you!" Huh??? In my mind, it had everything to do with me. But he had completely compartmentalized his behavior.

Certainly, not all men compartmentalize to this extent—but many do. I don't think it's a "character flaw." I think it's part of the way men have been conditioned in our society—to "partition" their lives in lots of areas: work on one hand, home life on the other; rational-thinking on one side, (blocked) emotions on the other; sex on one hand, love on the other, etc.

For some insight into the "male" way of thinking, here's what my husband wrote in *Beyond Affairs*, the book we wrote in 1980 telling our own personal story:

The old 'what she doesn't know can't hurt her' philosophy was the cornerstone of my belief system. While I was having affairs, I was convinced it was true. I am amazed at my ability to rationalize my actions and compartmentalize my values so I didn't have any internal conflict with what I was doing.

Besides compartmentalizing, men also use rationalization when having affairs.

Here are some of MY comments from *Beyond Affairs*:

*I'd assumed he felt guilty, but he'd rationalized all his actions as having nothing to do with me. I'd believed I could have some control over whether or not he had affairs by my own behavior--but he said nothing I did made any difference.*

And in *The Monogamy Myth*, I wrote:

Men have been conditioned to be capable of separating sex from other aspects of life somewhat more than women. They have learned through business or team sports to be able to compartmentalize their lives and participate in events with others, even when there are tensions or disagreements.

As women, we tend to think in terms of a direct connection between sex and love. We think, "If he loves me, he won't have an affair. And if he has an affair, it means he doesn't love me." That is not the way men think. Many men who have affairs declare that they still love their wives, but also enjoy the pleasure/excitement/ego-boost, etc. of an affair. (If all men were completely honest, many would acknowledge that in their ideal world (if there were no negative consequences), they would like to have a wife/family—and have affairs too.) This is all so alien to most women that we can't quite imagine how they can think that way. But the reality is that many men do think that way.

So getting a man to understand/acknowledge - and change - his way of compartmentalizing involves recognizing that he compartmentalizes in many areas of his life, not just in having affairs. Therefore, it's a major undertaking to change this mindset.

However, this does not mean that a man can't stop this behavior - especially when the efforts to compartmentalize "blow up in his face." Then men typically go into "damage control" mode - which includes trying to avoid talking and/or avoid going to counseling. Their hope is that by "stonewalling" and not addressing the way they have compartmentalized, the spouse will finally give up and quit asking them to deal with it.

But it's essential that the spouse not accept this - because it's been shown (statistically) that there is a strong correlation between "answering questions and talking through the whole thing" with both "recovery" and "rebuilding the marriage." (Sometimes men will believe statistics when they won't believe a statement they view as just "opinion.")

IF the spouse cannot succeed in getting the one who had an affair to read/talk/confront their tendency to compartmentalize, etc., then counseling would certainly be in order. However, it's essential that the couple go to a counselor who focuses specifically on the issue of affairs, not just doing traditional "marital therapy."

As for whether the spouse should just give up and "move on"...

it's seldom wise to "move on" too soon - without making every effort to get him to deal with it. The reason is because if a person fails to make every effort possible for quite awhile, they're likely to forever "second-guess" themselves, making it difficult to "live with their decision to divorce." So even if there is eventually a divorce, the time and effort to do everything possible is worthwhile. (It's not just what decision you make, but how and when you make it that determines the long-term ability to live with it.)

I discuss some of this thinking in an Article on my website titled "Deciding whether to stay married or get a divorce." Also, below are some guidelines about the marriage-divorce dilemma excerpted from "The Monogamy Myth."

### Some Guidelines For Solving The Marriage/Divorce Dilemma

1. *Make your own decision (regardless of what others think).*
2. *Do not rush the decision.*
3. *Get as much information as possible about your own situation and about affairs in general.*
4. *Consider the emotional piece of this, but realize it's only one part, not the sole basis for a good decision.*
5. *Consider the practical factors involved (including money, kids, and other relevant issues), but realize the importance of balancing these concerns with the more personal, emotional needs.*
6. *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? Changes of this kind don't happen overnight, but unless there's an indication of movement in this direction, there's little hope for developing a good marriage.*

*Deciding whether to stay married or get a divorce is a complicated decision, but carefully considering all these factors can help a person sort through their personal values and priorities to make the decision that best fits their individual situation. And by making a carefully considered decision in a rational way (instead of reacting to the panic of the initial shock of the affair or to the pressure from others to decide more quickly), they should reap the benefits of being more confident and at peace with whatever decision they make."*

(end of excerpt from "The Monogamy Myth")

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Addendum:

I am adding this a few hours after originally posting the above—due to receiving a message from a male reader who was very upset with my "stereotyping" compartmentalization as a male quality. Having struggled with his own wife's rationalizations, he found this hard to stomach.

I had originally included a "disclaimer" about "stereotypes," (since, obviously, no stereotype applies across the board). But I've heard from literally thousands of people through the years—and in general, women do not usually compartmentalize their affairs to the degree that most men do.

Most men compartmentalize this way—and most women tie their thinking about their affairs to whatever aggravation, dissatisfaction, disappointment they feel in their husbands (albeit unwarranted and unjustified as any excuse for affairs). They have a need to "justify" or "defend" the reason for their affairs as being their husbands' "fault," whereas men are more likely to compartmentalize and say it "has nothing to do with my wife."

I respond to every question based on the best overall information I have gained over my 25 years of hearing stories. And I bend over backwards to have as much of my writing as possible not deal with "stereotypes." But on this one point, it was my best perspective on the issue.

It's rare for me to write about any gender differences, because (as I have often written) when it comes to "recovery," there is no real difference between the impact on either men or women who are struggling with a spouse's affair. Pain is pain—without respect to who is affected.

## Is he sincere?

*Question:*

*My husband severed contact with the other woman. However, he has discontinued counseling and says we can work this out ourselves and he will stay in the marriage because it is the right thing to do. However, nothing has changed in our relationship except me knowing about his affair, his cutting it off and life goes on. Can I be assured that he is sincere?*

Peggy's Response:

Situations like the one described above are a mixture of good news and bad. It's extremely positive that contact has been severed with the third party. However, as I've repeatedly reported, the 3 key factors that determine whether a marriage is rebuilt include severing contact, answering all questions, and hanging in through the long-term process of recovery through ongoing honest communication.

So while someone may be quite sincere about their intention to work it out, the actions have more importance than the intentions. So it's not just a matter of sincerity; it's a matter of actually doing the work necessary to work things out.

Also, "working this out" and "staying in the marriage" are not a package deal. Some people stay in the marriage and work it out. Others simply stay in the marriage (perhaps "because it is the right thing to do") but don't work it out. Really working through it allows for the possibility of building a marriage even stronger than before. Not working through it (even if remaining married) usually leaves a feeling of emotional distance in the relationship.

So everyone needs to determine what they can live with, what trade-offs they're willing to make, etc. It's true that "life goes on" regardless of what is done. But the quality of is determined by the degree to which this whole experience is discussed and dealt with.

## How do I reach him?

*Question:*

*I have the distinct feeling that I'm the only person doing the work on the recovery. I have read everything about affairs I can find. I participate in group work on this site. I have been in individual therapy working on my issues. I have sought out the help of my church. Since about 6 months after the affair, my husband just refuses to participate in activities geared toward recovery, and some serious issues need to be addressed. How do I reach him?*

*Peggy's Response:*

This is a common lament—that only *one* person is doing all the work on the recovery. Ironically, *most* of the time it's the *spouse* of the person who had an affair who is doing this work. This is not as surprising as it might seem, however, because the person who had an affair generally just wants it to "go away" and not have to deal with it. And they hope that by simply doing nothing that their spouse will eventually just drop it.

The best *effort* at trying to reach someone who is resisting working on recovery is to continuously make it perfectly clear that this will *never* go away unless/until it is dealt with. As long as there's *any* illusion that you'll eventually just "get over it," there's a tendency to just wait and hope that will happen.

The reason I said "continuously" make it clear that it won't go away without being dealt with is that a failure to keep this in full awareness is to allow a misperception that perhaps you're doing better *without* their participating in any way. But after any period of *seeming* calm (without commenting on the need to deal with), they tend to think you're coming around. Then, when you *inevitably* raise the issue again (because it has only be buried, it has not gone away)—they say, "gosh, I thought you were doing so well."

So while it's important to maintain clarity about the fact that it must be discussed, this is *not* effective if it's done in a "nagging" or emotional way. It helps if you simply repeatedly state the fact (in a rational, clear-thinking kind of way) that it will not go away unless/until it is dealt with by *both* of you.

In the meantime, more focus on *yourself*—rather than on what/when/whether the partner will participate—allows you to be moving ahead to the degree that's possible on your own. Then you'll be better prepared whatever the eventual decision—whether to finally decide to leave the marriage—or decide to stay in a deadened marriage with the inevitable emotional distance that results from this unresolved issue. No one can *force* another person to do anything they are unwilling to do—but by taking charge of your own life, it's possible for the other person to change in reaction to the changes they see in you.

## What if I don't "miss" him anymore?

*Question:*

*After months of riding the roller-coaster from hell, things have now finally settled down after my husband's affair. The problem??? We have worked through this crisis together, but now that I finally feel as though I have a life once again that does not always include worrying about his affair, it feels as though I am sharing my life with my best friend as opposed to my husband.*

*For instance, I went out with the "girls" the other night and I noticed afterward that I had not really thought about him while I was away, did not really miss him, was not really anxious to get home. In the past, it would have been quite the opposite. In any sense, it frightens me sometimes because I am not sure how strong my feelings are for him any more.*

*Peggy's Response:*

This letter raises a concern that many of us experience when the nature of our relationship with our husband undergoes a significant change—whether or not the change is related to affairs. I also personally identify with the experience of going from being focused (obsessed?) with my husband to being quite satisfied when we're apart. This feeling is so unfamiliar for most of us as women that we assume something is "wrong" when we don't "miss" our husbands. Ironically, one of the byproducts of an affair is that it addresses whatever private fear of an affair may have been buried inside that led us to feel somewhat insecure or anxious about being apart.

When a marriage shifts to a deeper relationship based on really knowing each other and becoming "best friends," we tend to think that something is "lost." In fact, it's just the normal change from one stage of love to another. Some couples never successfully make this transition; but ironically, it can happen when a couple put in the time and effort to work together to deal with a crisis like an affair. If you make it through to the other side, you can finally "relax" with each other in a way that you couldn't do before.

For instance, I now absolutely love time alone. And even during an extended time away from my husband last year to attend to a family illness in another state, I never really "missed" him. When I commented on this to a friend whose own husband died several years ago, she gently reminded me that my enjoyment of time without my husband is based on knowing that it's not full-time and forever, knowing I can still be with him whenever I want. This perspective can help us see that our earlier idea of "togetherness" as an essential part of a good relationship may not have been true—so there's no need for concern when we don't "miss" being together.

### Is "total commitment" asking too much?

*Question:*

*He only really ended the affair a couple of weeks ago, and his actions are saying a lot already that he wants to rebuild the trust. It just seems like he is scared of making the final leap into total commitment. I honestly think what I am after is total commitment, right here, right now. Is that asking too much, too soon?*

Peggy's Response:

Wanting "total commitment" is understandable, but, of course, it can't be demanded (or given) unless/until it's real. In fact, experiencing such a quick turn-around in attitude within a couple of weeks and professing total commitment *might* be premature or superficial—and therefore not lasting.

In other words, the *process* of reaching this kind of total commitment may be more important than just saying the "right" words. In fact, *actions* are more important than *words* anyway. So actions that show a desire to rebuild trust are probably much more important than any words of commitment.

Feeling that there's an *honest* sharing of feelings about the situation (even when it's not what's preferred) is usually better than getting "reassurance" that may be "false reassurance." Most people can deal with any situation when they *know* where they stand (as opposed to having to guess). So "knowing" the real thinking is more valuable than potentially "hearing what you want to hear" if it's not completely "honest."

## Is there any hope?

*Question:*

*My spouse has stated that after numerous affairs, he is only "90%" sure that this will never happen again, that sex is not love, and that he loves me more than anything. However, he is not totally open to all questions, and demands his privacy. He does have some very wonderful qualities, but 90% is not good enough for me. Also, he refuses marriage counseling, and insists upon maintaining "friendly" ties w/ his latest girlfriend. Is there hope or do I move on?*

*Peggy's Response:*

This letter raises some very important questions—so I'll briefly address each of these issues:

*"He is only 90% sure that this will never happen again."* Stating it this way sounds as if he has no control and assumes no responsibility regarding whether it happens again. On the other hand, even if someone says they're 100% sure (and means it), this is not an absolute "guarantee." However, it's important to at least have an intention of avoiding future affairs.

*"Sex is not love."* While this can be an interesting philosophical debate, it's meaningless as an argument to justify having an affair.

*"He loves me more than anything."* While this may be true, the larger question is whether he cares about not hurting you more than anything (including his personal pleasure).

*"He is not totally open to ALL questions."* This is a bigger danger signal than the 90% comment—because this relates to his actions rather than just what he says. When someone fails to fully address a previous affair, it increases the possibility of future affairs. Whereas answering questions and talking through the first affair make it less likely that there will be a repeat—because it illustrates a willingness to take responsibility for what happened.

*"He demands his privacy."* There's a huge difference between privacy and secrecy. Everyone deserves privacy, but demanding to be free to do things that increase the possibility of future affairs is not about privacy. It's usually part of a tactic to hide irresponsible behavior.

*"He refuses marriage counseling."* This is similar to "refusing to answer questions" above. It's not so much about counseling per se as about an unwillingness to take responsibility for what happened.

*"He insists upon maintaining "friendly" ties w/ his latest girlfriend."* Severing ties with the third party is one of the key factors involved in recovering and rebuilding a primary relationship. Maintaining a "friendship" (whether or not it goes beyond just friends) inevitably contributes to ongoing pain/anxiety on the part of a person in the position of the woman who wrote this letter.

*"Is there hope or do I move on?"* No one else can make this decision for someone. Every person looks at their own choices and what trade-offs they are willing to make. However, in this instance, the question is somewhat surprising in that the letter-writer seems to have already answered her own question in saying: "90% is not good enough for me." So I'm just providing some additional perspective for anyone seeking more information about these issues.

Finally, consistently using terms like demands, refuses and insists sound extremely rigid and controlling, providing little indication of a willingness to relate on a basis of fairness and equality. So sometimes it's helpful to look at the underlying attitudes, not just at the specific words or actions.

## What about "high school sweethearts?"

Question #1:

*Second marriage for both. He is 67, I am 59. Both retired. He just had an affair with a high school girl from his past. He was the high school hero but he was also mine and he knew it. We have had 17 years of happiness and now this has come out of nowhere. When we married we made a vow that if temptation ever reared its ugly head we would confront it or leave the marriage before either of us acted on it. He has betrayed my total trust and belief in our marriage.*

Question #2:

*I fell in love with a woman who is not my spouse 1-1/2 years ago. We were high school sweethearts and reconnected after 33 years. We were both lonely and unhappy in our marriages for a number of years before we reconnected. People who have affairs are condemned, but what is so wrong about seeking happiness for the short time we are here? Yes, our spouses are devastated, but are we to sacrifice our lives, just to make them happy and go back to a miserable existence?*

Question #3:

*What do I do when I have told my spouse that I am willing to do whatever it takes to move past this, but the spouse feels too much guilt and remorse to come home? He also feels that if he strayed with this old girlfriend from high school, then he must not love his wife. What is the best way to wait? Is there anything that I can do to help him?*

Peggy's Response:

As I've discussed often in the past, love exists in many different forms—and it changes as it goes through various stages. For instance the initial euphoria stage of "new love" lasts a short time, then (if the relationship is sustained) it gradually moves to a different stage that is more realistically based.

"New love" (at any age) is a very unique type of love—and the "new love" that was our first love as teenagers feels the most special of all. This is why there can be such power in rediscovering that long-ago first love. Unfortunately, we cling to the feelings generated by that first love as being dependent on it having been that particular person—when, in fact, *any* person who filled the role of "first love" would generate those feelings. It's not really about the specific person; it's about the circumstances of their having been the "first."

My own experience is not typical in that I married my "first love." (James and I have known each other all of our lives, starting school together in the first grade. We were childhood sweethearts, teenage "steadies," and married at age 19.) But I've often felt that if we had not somehow managed to end up together, I would have carried that special connection for the rest of my life.

But since I *did* marry my first love, I recognize that the kind of love we experienced at that time is tied to the memory of the situation all those years ago and not representative of the kind of mature love that exists today. All of us change dramatically over time, and in many respects we're extremely different now from the way we were when we were teenagers. Each of us has changed in countless ways. (In some ways it's hard to look back and recognize that we're even the same people.) So while the couple we were as teenagers remains a special memory—we are not the same couple that made a life together, through pain and pleasure and kids and affairs...

So it's not reasonable to compare a kind of fairy-tale image based on teenage love with real-life married love over a period of years. What's important is to value the first love for what it represents (the first experience of young love), but not to assume that it was the particular person who made it special. The specialness was in the experience itself, not the person with whom it was shared. So while it's not necessary to try to forget a first love, it is important to put it in its proper place—as just a stepping-stone to growing up and engaging in a deeper love based on making a life together.

The situations described in this week's questions are an unfortunate result of a failure to appreciate that the strong connection to our "first love" is due to the newness of this first experience of love, no matter who played the role of teenage sweetheart. Almost certainly, if the role of the person who was the first love and the role of the person who is the spouse had been reversed, then the temptation to return to the first love would be the same—even though the person would be different. It's all about the differing roles filled by the first love and the long-term spouse, *not* about the particular people who filled those roles.

So the idea of changing partners at this stage (unrealistically thinking you can recapture—and sustain that special feeling you shared as teenagers) is an exercise in futility. Even if the person returning to their first love fails to believe this, it's important for the spouse to have this understanding for whatever small comfort it may provide to know that it's not a reflection on you as a person. And you can be sure that the one who naively returns to their first love will eventually learn this fact the hard way. It's better to keep the first love experience as a pleasant memory, and *not* spoil it by trying to recapture it. This way, a lot of pain could be avoided for everyone involved.

P.S. Even if the above information does not "get through" to those people currently caught up in this situation, I hope it will help others avoid going down this path. Yes, there's often a great deal of curiosity about "what ever happened to so-and-so?" (And yes, the Internet makes it easier than ever before to follow-up on that curiosity and actually find out what happened to them.) But it's a dangerous exercise—even if there is no intention of pursuing contact. Unfortunately, these kinds of situations can trigger teenage-type emotions and get out of control, causing problems that can be avoided by understanding these dynamics in advance.

## How can I deal with his affair with his high school sweetheart?

*Question:*

*My husband is having an affair with his high school sweetheart. He wants to stay in our home (with me) until he decides what to do. I don't know if I can stand this pain and humiliation. Can you suggest a strategy to deal with this situation?*

Peggy's Response:

Any strategy in dealing with this situation involves some risk, so only the person who will live with the consequences can decide which risks they are willing to take. Some of the obvious considerations (in addition to the "pain and humiliation" mentioned above) include:

- whether asking him to leave will push him further away or "bring him to his senses"
- whether practical considerations (children/finances) dictate a certain strategy
- whether the husband is a volatile person or may be able to act rationally
- whether there's a determination to do "whatever it takes" to save the marriage

One general strategy has more to do with "attitude" than "action." The thing that stood out in the question was the comment "until he decides what to do." This kind of approach (where his decision is the only one to be made) sets up a one-up/one-down kind of situation that does not usually bode well for anyone. So one strategy might be to make it clear that *both* people will be deciding what they will do. When he assumes that he has all the power (that the wife's commitment is a given and he doesn't need to consider whether she might not just stand by and wait), this might possibly lead him to make a decision sooner rather than later.

In many instances like this, a man can remain in limbo for a very long time. As he moves toward one decision, he focuses on the losses with the other; then moving toward the other decision, he focuses on the losses with the first—leaving him undecided and wavering until something forces a decision. This is not to suggest that an "ultimatum" should be given (since those often backfire), but simply clarifying that both husband and wife have a decision to make—not just him. And during this "limbo" time, it's helpful if the wife keeps as busy as possible, not neglecting other areas of life. Digging down and finding whatever strength can be mustered to do things on your own that have nothing to do with the other person can have a positive impact, not only on her own sense of herself but on his attitude toward her (in that being "pitiful" is usually a turn-off and not at all appealing).

With these general background thoughts, I want to point out some factors involved in these kinds of situations—where people get caught up in the fantasy of recreating their "first love." It's true that there's a certain power to young love and that it makes an indelible imprint on us, especially if it was a good experience. Unfortunately, many people maintain a fantasy image of that special first love and elevate it to some mystical place of perfection. So while wishing to turn back the clock is understandable, the strong feelings probably are tied to the memory of the person as they were many years ago rather than to the real person who exists today. All of us change dramatically over time, and in many respects we're not the same people we were when we were young.

So if people come back together later (as in the above letter), they may try to pick up where they left off in their feelings for each other. But this fails to appreciate that it's the timing and the situation that have recreated this new flush of love. If people reconnect (and stay reconnected for many years), the relationship does not sustain this specialness that is inherent in it's (revised) "newness."

The love we have as teenagers is not the same as the love that develops through building a life together. But unfortunately, we have this notion that *love* is only that first flush of romantic love, but as I've explained before, this is only the first stage of love. It either changes or it withers and dies. So while it may be tempting to pine for the fantasy of young love, it's important to know that the reality of being married, raising kids, and facing all of life's challenges together is the basis for lasting love.

So it's not reasonable to compare a kind of fairy-tale image based on teenage love with real-life married love over a period of years. The specialness was in the experience itself, not the person with whom it was shared. So while it's not necessary to try to forget a first love, it is important to put it in its proper place—as just a stepping-stone to growing up and engaging in a real love based on making a life together.

To some degree, it's common to never quite get over our feelings for our first love. And there's no problem with that; it's a very special experience. The problem comes when we allow the memory of the past (and the fantasy of a possible future) intrude on the present in such a way as to jeopardize the lives we have now. A good marriage is a great blessing, not to be taken lightly or put at risk because of such feelings. Life has many twists and turns, and the older we get, the more we realize that it's more important to protect and preserve what's good about the present.

## Can he become "unwilling" to be dishonest?

*Question:*

*My husband ended his 2-year affair (after being caught) almost two years ago. I am still recovering. You have said that the trump factor for an affair is a willingness to be dishonest and deceptive. We agree with you that the trump factor is a willingness to be dishonest and deceptive. He says he regrets his affair and is committed to our marriage. Is it possible for one to change their dishonest and deceptive willingness to "unwilling" based on exposure of their affair?*

Peggy's Response:

In a word, Yes, it is possible to change a "willingness" to be dishonest to an "unwillingness" to be dishonest after the exposure of their affair. That's not to say that it's always the case; but it's certainly possible.

In fact, this is precisely the outcome that is desired: that someone finally recognizes (acknowledges) the dishonesty—and the consequences of that dishonesty, thereby facing up to the ramifications of their former "willingness" to be deceptive. However, the likelihood of their being "unwilling" to be dishonest in the future has a strong correlation with the degree to which they "take responsibility" for what happened.

"Taking responsibility" is not just "regretting the affair" or "saying he's sorry." It is acknowledging that his actions (in having an affair) are the cause of the pain being experienced by his spouse. Therefore it's up to him to do whatever it takes to help alleviate that pain. This usually involves taking certain specific actions (that I've listed repeatedly), including:

1. Severing contact with the third party;
2. Answering whatever questions are asked (for as long as they are asked);
3. Hanging in through the long process of overcoming the emotional impact of this experience.

To understand why someone may now be "unwilling" to be dishonest and deceptive (when previously they were "willing" to be that way), it's important to realize that they weren't necessarily consciously deciding to be dishonest when they had the affair. Believe it or not, they were simply "not thinking" about the consequences of the dishonesty.

But once an affair is discovered, they're confronted with the consequences of the dishonesty, making it more difficult to ignore/deny the reality of their "willingness" to be dishonest. Then when they're consciously making a choice (rather than just "not thinking"), they're more likely to be "unwilling" to be dishonest and deceptive.

## Is he telling the truth?

### Question:

*I just found out that my husband has been having an affair. We haven't been getting along for several years, and I have been the biggest problem I would have to say in this. I would call him names, told him I hated him, he was a loser, the list goes on. I felt like I didn't know if I loved him anymore. He told me this is why he did this; not because he didn't love me but because he didn't feel loved. I was completely devastated. Never did I think he would do this, but he said he couldn't take the verbal abuse and the no love any longer. Do you think he is telling the truth?*

### Peggy's Response:

While the "reason" someone has an affair is never just *one* reason, the above scenario certainly would make anyone much more vulnerable to having an affair. (This is not to "blame" her for the fact that the affair happened, but simply to acknowledge that it might be one of the factors involved.) It appears that the letter-writer had ceased to want or need anything from her husband—and was keeping him at a distance. But now that she has learned of his affair, she has been "devastated."

From the outside, there is no way to know whether the devastation from the affair reflects a new awareness of her love for him (that had been buried under criticism) or whether it's just a reaction to the risk of losing him. Sometimes this kind of experience reawakens "real" feelings that have been buried, but sometimes it simply reflects a desire to be "wanted" or a desire to be the one "calling the shots."

In any relationship, there's usually a sense that one person "wants" or "needs" more from the other than is true in reverse. (This has been referred to as being in the "one-up" position or the "one-down" position in the relationship.)

In a healthy, fairly balanced, more egalitarian kind of relationship, there will be a natural shift from time to time in the sense of who wants/needs more from the other. However, in some relationships, one person may always seem to be more focused on themselves (being more attuned to meeting their own wants/needs)—while the other is constantly focused on their partner (accommodating to the wants/needs of their partner.) Of course, *any* significant event (like dealing with an affair) can lead to shifts in the dynamics of the relationship.

In a situation like the above, it would seem that this kind of experience can serve as a "wake-up call" for a reassessment of the relationship. So rather than worrying about the specific reason for the affair, it might be more useful to see what can *now* be done to learn from this experience and develop a better relationship.

## What is the long-term effect, both emotionally and on the marriage?

*Question:*

*I wonder if you would make a statement about your overall emotional state and that of your marriage. The state of my marriage is almost identical to what took place in yours. We are roughly 2 years into recovery and doing well all things considered. I occasionally feel a certain hopelessness though, and I wonder how others who have survived a trauma similar to mine are coping much further into recovery.*

Peggy's Response:

The above question begins by asking me "personally" about my overall emotional state and that of my marriage. So I'll share a little about that before addressing the larger general issue of "surviving this kind of trauma."

First of all, I don't want to imply that anyone else should have precisely the same long-term result as mine. But since I was asked, my own overall emotional state and that of my marriage is filled with ups and downs, pretty much like all marriages. However, my emotional state and the state of my marriage that relates specifically to having gone through the traumatic experience of my husband's affairs - is extremely good.

While I would never say I'm "thankful" for having had this experience, I'm convinced that our dealing completely and thoroughly with all aspects of his affairs (primarily the way we made a new and different life-long commitment to "complete responsible honesty") led me to have a better emotional state and a led us to have a better marriage than would have been possible without having gone through the long and difficult process of recovering from this crisis.

I want to be clear that I'm *not* saying the affairs helped me or our marriage. It was clearly the work we did to establish a new and stronger relationship based on honesty that made the difference. As with any life crisis, the long-term fall-out is often based more on what a person does in response to the crisis than to the crisis itself. (Frankly, inevitably everyone faces various crises in life, but it's how we respond to the crises that has the most long-lasting impact on us and those around us. We constantly see stories that contradict the "common wisdom" of what would seem to be the natural reaction/result to a crisis.)

Now, regarding the latter part of the above question (as to how others are coping much further into recovery)... much of it depends on the length of time involved. Most people cope much better as more time passes. (The 2-year mark is only the possible point at which the strong emotional pain goes away.) As for long-term coping, I see a wide variety of situations. Many, like me, are not only coping, but thriving. Others (mainly those who never fully dealt with what happened) continue to carry the scars that allow the past to interfere with the present.

One final comment about the above statement: " I occasionally feel a certain hopelessness"... I suspect that this feeling of "hopelessness" is related to being stuck in "wishing this had never happened"—in essence wanting to change the past (which, of course, is impossible). The hopelessness is related to the difficulty in fully accepting the reality that this experience is now part of your life forever—forever changing the vision you had of "the way my life/marriage was supposed to be." As I've mentioned before, it takes a lot of time to fully integrate this new reality into our lives, and it helps to try to avoid getting depressed (or feeling hopeless) over this natural struggle with coming to grips with this "trauma."

## What about the disillusionment with roles after a spouse's affair?

*Question:*

*My husband and I have been working on recovering our marriage and I have been working on my own personal recovery. In my personal recovery I have been really looking closely at what our relationship and our roles throughout the years have been. I now see things in a new light and feel very disillusioned about what I thought we were doing. Could you please discuss this pattern as it relates to people who are trying to personally recover and grow after a spouse's affair?*

*Peggy's Response:*

I think that "rethinking" our lives (and our roles in the relationship) is a natural occurrence when our spouse has an affair. This is especially true for those (like myself) who primarily identified themselves through their role as "wife." So when I felt I had failed as a wife (falsely seeing his affairs as my fault), I felt I had failed as a person.

Since I think my experience is typical of the pattern of being disillusioned with the old roles and "seeing things in a new light," I'll share some of my thoughts about the changes in our roles and expectations: (Note: these thoughts are excerpted from our 1980 book, *Beyond Affairs*.)

*We were thoroughly conditioned in the traditional roles of men and women. The joy of being together was dampened by the serious way I approached my role as a wife. I was dedicated to working very hard and doing everything that could possibly be expected of me. In short, I submerged myself in my new role.*

*One of the drawbacks to this was that 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 set myself up as a second-class citizen, devoted to James' comfort and service. It was easy for him to begin seeing me as my role instead of the person he married.*

*We had developed very sharp role distinctions after the kids were born. I took pride in doing a good job in my role as wife and mother. It was important that I be successful in my work as a homemaker. To him it was frivolous. That was the nature of the role divisions we had bought into. It's too bad we had such narrowly defined roles. We could have shared so much more of our lives with each other if we had been more open.*

*If we are full-time homemakers we feel defensive about being "just a housewife." If we are working mothers we feel guilty for not being a full-time housewife. During different periods of time the pressure has changed from one to the other. Hopefully, we are moving toward an attitude that accepts the idea of a woman doing what is right for her at any given time in her life.*

*I didn't like the way I compared with James in my own eyes or in the eyes of others. I felt completely powerless and helpless. I didn't value my opinions because I didn't value myself. I went into every disagreement with James assuming I'd be shown where I was wrong. I made it easy for him to take advantage of me. And he did.*

Finally, James grew uncomfortable with the dishonesty and inequality—and told me about his affairs. Here some of HIS comments about our roles, also excerpted from *Beyond Affairs*.

Having an honest, satisfying, male-female relationship in our society has been next to impossible. The stereotypes and prejudices we grow up with make it extremely difficult to ever see the other person as he or she really is. The games we learn to play make our interactions anything but honest. And the myths we've been taught about love relationships continually keep us from dealing with what's really happening. We deny the truth while hoping and dreaming for the impossible.

*In traditional marriages, fixed roles give many people feelings of security and stability. The current divorce rate suggests that there's more illusion than reality to these feelings. It was frightening to give up the roles we had used to define ourselves for almost nineteen years of married life. At the same time we knew in our hearts and guts that we were onto something significant. Gradually, honest communication and a commitment to equality have replaced fixed roles as the cornerstones of our changing relationship.*

*Since I first opened up to her, we've completely redefined our relationship. Honest communication has been the primary process we've used and continue to use. It's led us to realize our relationship can never be a fixed thing—that it will always be in process as each of us continues to grow and change.*

*Peggy and I place a high priority on honest communication because of the tremendous impact it's had on our lives. My opening up to her signaled a new level of respect and equality in our relationship. At the same time she knew, once and for all, that she had to assume the primary responsibility for meeting her needs. The fairy tale was over.*

Finally, here are my later reflections based on my own experience:

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 excerpts from *Beyond Affairs*)

## How do we get past this?

*Question:*

*You refer to the time your husband grew tired of the dishonesty and told you of his affairs. I "found out" about my husband by checking up on my suspicions. While that did get everything out in the open, I wonder if he would have ever told me and that hurts. He did cut her off, and now feels guilty and regrets having hurt two people, me and the other woman. He says if he had ended it on his own, he could have worked a resolution out in a better way. How do we get past this?*

*Peggy's Response:*

This is a very complex set of questions—all understandable, but all ultimately unanswerable. Even a husband in a situation like the one above can't possibly know for sure whether he would have eventually voluntarily told of the affair. (For instance, my own husband was very surprised when we awoke in the night with the sudden thought that he was going to tell me.)

Here's an excerpt from *Beyond Affairs* where he describes this time:

I was shocked when I woke up at 3:00 a.m. in a New Jersey motel room and started thinking about telling Peggy. I was there on a two-day consulting job. I had not been with a woman. I hadn't tried. I just remember my surprise at waking in the middle of the night and thinking, "Now is the time for me to tell Peggy. To the best of my knowledge I'd never seriously entertained that thought before. I'd had countless discussions about affairs with other men on a continuing basis, but we never talked about the possibility of being honest with our wives.

Of course, the decision to tell wasn't as sudden as it seemed. Here's another passage from the book that describes some of what led up to the telling:

As I look back on it, I think the decision to tell Peggy about my affairs was inevitable. The double standard had been easy to maintain in the university years when our lives had been quite separate. But things had changed substantially. Our relationship had taken on a new meaning as we were moving out of the old role definitions of man and wife and taking our first tentative steps at forming a true partnership of equals. In the past year we'd started to focus more directly on improving our relationship than we'd ever done in the past. As we did this, I became more and more uncomfortable with the feeling she was playing with some cards missing while I had a full deck.

Even with the decision to tell, the fears might still have prevented it from happening—as described further:

*I knew I couldn't possibly predict her reaction. And I had the growing realization that I was going to tell her—I had to take the risk. I was scared shitless. I still remember the weird, unreal feeling I had...*

This fear is reasonable and understandable; there's no guarantee of the fall-out from such a disclosure, which is another reason it's so difficult to finally volunteer this information. So it's not necessarily an indictment of a person's future commitment if they didn't tell before being discovered. (After all, it took James 7 years to tell, and I might very well have discovered it prior to his finally coming to that point.)

As for the other part of the above question—that he "feels guilty and regrets having hurt two people, me and the other woman"... this reflects an unreasonable desire to avoid consequences. People always get hurt, regardless of how the affair is disclosed; there's no scenario that can

prevent this inevitable result. And while this kind of "concern about hurting two people" may reflect a positive characteristic of the husband in this case, the responsibility to the wife so far outweighs the responsibility to the third party that no alternative scenario as to how to end it would warrant the potential additional pain to the wife.

Also, the idea of "working a resolution out in a better way" is another case of unrealistic wishful thinking. When dealing with a messy situation like this, there's no way to neatly tie up all the loose ends so that everything is fine for everyone. The fallout from affairs simply doesn't work that way. So while it may be admirable to wish for a "perfect" resolution, there's no such thing.

The important thing is that the affair is over, that contact with the third party has been severed, and that the wife can focus on recovering from the pain and the couple can focus on rebuilding the marriage and going about the long process of rebuilding trust. So the best way to "get past" the current situation is for both people to stop going over scenarios of "if only..." or "what if..."—and to focus all their time and energy on dealing with the present and the future.

## What if he's a hypocrite?

(Below are two similar questions related to the issue of using religion to avoid dealing with the ramifications of an affair.)

*Question #1:*

*My husband who had the affair says that he saw the light and is now reborn. I do welcome this into our lives, yet history tells me that he will stop within a few months. He feels that if god has forgiven him, then I need to also; and he has stopped helping me recover. How can I get him to see that it is not that simple?*

*Question #2:*

*My husband recently announced that he has been saved. He goes to church every Sunday, but the rest of the week is back to the old person he was. After his announcement he said that he will no longer talk about his affair since he is at peace with god. I want to believe him, but his actions other than Sundays do not indicate that he has changed one bit. I think this is his way of "us" getting past it, but I am not done. I know he is still hiding things. I don't know what to do.*

Peggy's Response:

It's really unfortunate when someone uses religion to avoid taking responsibility for their actions. In fact, it's downright infuriating—because nothing could be more Non-religious than a self-serving posture that fails to consider the feelings of your spouse. While comments like "god has forgiven him" and being "at peace with god" may reflect some kind of personal resolution for a man who has had an affair, they do *nothing* to address the resolution needed for the sake of his wife and his marriage. The bottom-line: it's a cop-out.

Having said that, it's possible that this is not deliberately manipulative; it's just so darned "convenient" that it's easy to rationalize that this ought to make everything OK. But in some ways, it makes things even worse—because it makes it all the more difficult for the wife to get the attention to her personal struggle that is still unaddressed. This kind of callousness to the wife's feelings makes a sham of any proclamations of genuine religious conviction. (Religion is not just about "talking the talk," but "walking the walk.")

Setting aside the specific focus on religion, any ploy that ignores the spouse's suffering is not a legitimate reason (excuse) to expect the wife to "forgive and forget." This includes coercion about "forgiving" as well as refusing to talk. As I have written many times, forgiveness and trust are not bestowed. They are by-products of actions that inspire feelings of forgiveness and trust.

Frankly, it's not up to the person who had an affair to decide when or how there will be forgiveness or a readiness to move on; it's completely up to the spouse to make that determination. This issue doesn't just "go away" by ignoring it or avoiding it. It continues to be there (even if it's "buried"), continuing to damage the relationship. So unless/until there is a willingness to take responsibility for doing whatever the spouse needs in order to recover, there's little hope for rebuilding the marriage into the kind of relationship that people need and deserve.

Finally, I would recommend some reading that is not specifically about affairs, but that addresses one of the underlying issues. It's a book by Frank Pittman titled *Grow Up! How taking responsibility can make you a happy adult*.

## How can I deal with his pornography?

*Question:*

*I don't know how to cope with my husband watching pornography. I didn't have a problem with it before he had an affair—and even watched it with him. But now it bothers me a lot, and I don't know if I'm wrong in feeling this way. He has said that he would try and give it up if it would make me happy, but I'm not sure if I feel right about that either. I really don't want to be unfair. I just don't know what to do.*

*Peggy's Response:*

These feelings are not a matter of being "wrong." This reaction is understandable, given the affair. There is now a stronger feeling of being threatened and being more vulnerable in general—so what once was not a problem, now IS a problem. This doesn't necessarily mean that he's "wrong" either, since this was something he'd been doing all along before the affair. So working through this together will work better if it's couched in terms of what's effective or reasonable—not who is "wrong."

The fact that he is "willing" to give it up may be more significant than whether or not he actually gives it up. This is a positive sign—and can be used as the basis for ongoing communication, whether or not he gives it up. The talking is important, because any arbitrary decision (without fully discussing it) may lead to resentments. For instance, if he "does" give it up, he may become resentful. And if he "doesn't" give it up, *she* may become resentful. But if they talk through all their feelings about it—both now and on an ongoing basis, the process of openly talking can help bring them closer together. It might even help move her toward being more comfortable watching pornography with him again—or move him further away from interest in it because it's so open (thereby keeping it from being a kind of "private/secret" activity that comes between them).

As to what's "fair," there are several ways of being unfair. It may be unfair of her to ask him to give it up, but it also may be unfair of him to continue despite the fact that it hurts her. So, again, hopefully it won't come down to whether or not she "makes him" give it up. Hopefully, by talking through it (not just once, but as a part of an ongoing open communication about all aspects of their lives, especially the ones affected by the affair) they can "agree" on what to do. He may "choose" to give it up if he truly understands her pain. Or she may "choose" for him to continue if she finds a way to join in again or if his need for it diminishes.

It's up to every couple to get beyond the idea of "win-lose" and try to evaluate the situation together—and "together" determine the best course of action. If he chooses to stop now, it doesn't necessarily mean it's forever. A reassessment at a later time (when perhaps she has recovered more from the impact of his affair) might lead to resuming the behavior. But for now, her distress is perfectly normal and understandable. Finally, however, every couple needs to sort through these kinds of things for themselves; I'm only pointing toward a "process" that might help in resolving this issue.

## Intimacy?!

### Question #1:

*In reference to the response to a previous question and other answers given in the past, how am I, the wife who wants her husband back, supposed to play hard to get (something forbidden) and try to connect and re-establish some intimacy at the same time? I agree with the logic behind both but need some guidance on when to do what.*

### Question #2:

*I am a little confused. In some of the answers you've given you say that something that is out of reach is usually desired more - like Romeo and Juliette. Then in other answers you say that couples need to try to reconnect through more intimacy. Should I welcome him when he wants to pretend he's a good father and husband although he refuses to give up his mistress, or should I suspend his privileges of coming here and be unavailable? Might this leave him to think I'm no longer interested?*

### Question #3:

*I liked the answer you gave about how the husband could get rid of some of his guilt by being more intimate with his wife - it makes good sense! Are you suggesting that the wife should be open to attempts to be hugged and kissed and more time spent together? Surely you aren't saying that she should have sex with him while the affair is ongoing?*

### Question #4:

*What type of questions would you suggest asking a spouse who has had an affair with the goal of opening them up? Because of past conversations that have led to arguments, my husband is hesitant to talk about anything to do with the affair, let alone his "feelings." How do we ever achieve the intimacy you talk about?*

### Peggy's Response:

Unfortunately, intimacy has come to be used as short-hand for sex. They are *not* the same thing. The real definition of intimacy is simply "something of a personal or private nature" or "the state of being intimate."

The definition of being intimate is "marked by very close association, contact, or familiarity...suggesting informal warmth or privacy...of a very personal or private nature." And more specifically "belonging to or characterizing one's deepest nature." The bottom line is that establishing (or re-establishing) intimacy is based on two people being willing to share/expose their deepest, truest (most honest) self in relating to each other.

Based on this broader understanding of the meaning of intimacy, *the conflict described in Question #1* is easier to address. I agree that "playing hard to get" is inconsistent with developing intimacy, but I've never advocated that (since it's based on games or manipulation, which is the antithesis of intimacy); however, being "independent" and "going about your own business" can be attractive to a spouse who has taken you for granted. There's really no conflict in being "independent" and still being "open and honest" in your communication, which keeps open the possibility of re-establishing intimacy. That's because we can only be truly intimate with people when we're being "real" (open and honest).

*The dilemma in Questions #2 and #3* relate to situations where the affair is still going on. (Question #2 asks: "should I suspend his privileges of coming here and be unavailable?" and

Question #3 asks: "should [I] be open to attempts to be hugged and kissed...?") I'm not suggesting intimacy of a sexual nature while the affair is still going on. And, in fact, the comments in the earlier Question about re-establishing intimacy were aimed at the husband to debunk his excuse for continuing the affair (that he's "not worthy of her love"). I was trying to make the point that he's unlikely to overcome his guilt by staying in the affair; that his best chance for dealing with the guilt is by coming home and working to re-establish intimacy with his wife (by being real/open/honest).

*Finally, in Question #4*, the writer recognizes the challenge of achieving intimacy when her "husband is hesitant to talk about anything to do with the affair, let alone his 'feelings.'" Inherent in establishing intimacy is a willingness to share honest thoughts and feelings.

--For ideas on getting them to open up, ask them to read two of the "Articles about Affairs posted on the website: "Talking About Affairs" and "The Need to Know" (which includes a helpful section called Joseph's Letter.

--For ideas on avoiding a situation where "the conversations lead to arguments," you need to read (and act on the information in) the section titled "The Importance of Reinforcing Honesty" in the article titled: "The Need to Know."

## Will I ever be "in love" again?

*Question:*

*It's been 3 years since I found out about my husband's affairs. He has answered all my questions many times. I care about him, but will I ever be in love with him again?*

Peggy's Response:

I chose the above question this week because it will be posted just one week before Valentine's Day, when so many people will be focusing on love. I want to use this opportunity to go beyond the limited focus on "romantic love" (that is typical of Valentine's) to talk about the larger significance of *love* in our lives.

This is particularly important when dealing with the issue of "love" following an affair. All too often we think of love *only* as a "feeling," but there's strong evidence that love can also be a "decision." So part of the hope for recovering the loving feelings is deciding to do so. This doesn't mean you can "force" the feelings, but it does mean that you decide to be open to them and take the kind of actions that will "let them come in."

If both people genuinely want to increase their intimacy, they CAN do it—not by sitting around waiting to "magically" begin feeling close again—but by doing things that can lead to that kind of closeness. Since loving feelings are often a byproduct of loving/caring behavior, it's important to engage in as many small loving acts of caring as possible on a daily basis. This can make all the difference in stimulating the feelings of love that may be missing at the moment.

For more on this, read one of the articles permanently posted on my website titled "Recovering those "loving feelings" after an affair."

Now... I'd like to more generally address the whole issue of love—and try to clarify the meaning of "Love" (which is different from the feeling of being "in love").

Unfortunately, we've come to think of *love* as the exciting, heady feelings of "*falling* in love." The "newness" of any relationship, whether it begins as a prelude to marriage or as an affair, creates a feeling of "being in love." This initial stage of a relationship usually lasts about 2 years. (Most affairs last between 6 months and 2 years, when this newness wears off and reality sets in.)

"Lasting" love is quite different from "new" love, and comparing the feelings of being "in love" (that sometimes happen in an affair) with the lasting "love" in a long-term relationship is like comparing apples and oranges. The "love" for an affair-partner is simply the euphoric feeling that comes with the "newness" of a fantasy relationship, not something that warrants equal footing with the deeper "love" from a life built together in reality.

Here are some excerpts from our book, *Making Love Stay* that explain more about "love."

(I've also inserted some comments as to how this relates specifically to extramarital affairs).

### *The Changing Nature of Love*

Love changes; it never remains the same... Falling in love, or "new love," produces some of the most intense feelings a person ever experiences—but it's important to recognize that much of the intensity of the feeling is inherent in its newness and novelty. (This is what happens in an affair; it's "new" and "novel," but it's just the first stage of love and won't last.) It either changes to a lasting feeling of "love" or it withers completely.

*Long-term, marital love is simply different (not less) than the new "in love" feelings of some affairs. Unfortunately, we have generally failed to appreciate this difference. Lasting love can have its own unique form of intensity and excitement, both of which emerge from a deeper knowledge of yourself and your partner. Eventually, in the best relationships, lasting love is based on the pleasure of full openness to another person—without anxiety, uncertainty, or fear. It surrounds you with a feeling that is both calming and deeply satisfying. In fact, it touches you at your very center and gives you a special sense of the worth of life itself.*

(end of the excerpt from *Making Love Stay*)

Frankly, I get frustrated by the endless stream of suggestions for recapturing the feelings of "new love"—like having sex in strange places or going to motels with no luggage? I'm a little tired of hearing about all the gimmicks and tricks for "spicing up your sex life." (And while they may "work" temporarily, they do nothing to deal with the underlying feelings of love.)

I've long been concerned that reinforcing the idea of "spicing up your sex life" implies that "sizzling sex" is the ideal. I would even argue that the deeper, more honest, more vulnerable, more connected sex is better than the kind of sex based primarily on sizzle. (It's more real and less artificial.) And I see the temporary "hot streaks" (that can be a part of any long-term marriage) as just a little icing on the cake of sex based on the richness of a fuller love.

Based on working with extramarital affairs, I'm also concerned that any implication that a "sizzling sex life" is a goal worthy of constantly pursuing inadvertently feeds the idea of seeking it outside the marriage. It may take some time for someone who has been caught up in the fantasy of a new feeling to recognize that it wasn't really "special" - just "new." But in the meantime, it can help the spouse who may feel threatened by this "new love" to remember that it's only a stage that doesn't last.

I have a growing concern with the popular advice that's based on a short-sighted, superficial approach to sustaining (or reviving) love. This involves avoiding the pitfalls of the "romantic approach" to making love stay. There is a need to avoid the simplistic techniques and superficial views about love that are so prevalent. We need to elevate the meaning of a loving relationship beyond just achieving temporary pleasure.

Love is far too serious and significant in our lives to be given such short shrift. We're not talking about some little fringe issue in your life here. When all is said and done, having a long-term, loving relationship ranks near the top of the list of the best of what life has to offer. Your love can be the kind of positive force that lets you go out and face the world on a completely different basis than you could do otherwise. A better understanding of the true nature of love can help you achieve the kind of love that provides a solid place to stand in the world.

I want to close with a quote from a chapter James and I contributed to a book written by a variety of relationship experts. Our contribution was titled: *The Full Monty* and tries to place "love" in the broader context that it deserves.

Below is an excerpt from that chapter:

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.

You can read the entire chapter by going to the Articles about Marriage & Family posted on my website and find the one titled "The Full Monty."

## What about your own marriage—after 50 years?

I periodically receive questions from people who want an update on my own marriage. Since James and I are celebrated our 50th Wedding Anniversary on May 29, 2005, I thought this might be an appropriate time to deviate from my normal format and respond to questions like the one below.

Disclaimer: For those of you who already know more about me personally than you care to know, my apologies. You can just skip this particular post.

*Question:*

*What has your marriage been like since you dealt with the affairs? I wonder whether you have been monogamous all these years?*

Peggy's Response:

The answer is Yes, we have had a monogamous marriage for the past 31 years. At the time we confronted the affairs in 1974, James and I made a different kind of commitment, not to "monogamy," but to "honesty." And that commitment has resulted in our having a monogamous marriage for the past 31 years.

Below is an excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*:

*Honesty was the motivator for my husband telling me about his affairs. He became uncomfortable with deceiving me and felt I deserved more fairness and equality in the relationship. We also relied on honesty as a way of working through all the feelings that had built up through the years. And honesty was the basis of our commitment to the kind of relationship we wanted to develop in the future. While I wanted a monogamous relationship, I recognized the fallacy of a promise of monogamy. So James didn't promise to be monogamous; he promised to be honest. But the result of our commitment to honesty has led to our being monogamous during the thirty years since that commitment was made.*

*Our honesty is not restricted to issues related to affairs; we're honest about everything relevant to our relationship. This includes talking about our personal hopes and dreams as well as our private fears and anxieties. While this kind of honesty brings a special bond to a relationship, there's a personal benefit as well that is often overlooked. Honesty provides a firm place to stand in the world. It forms a solid basis from which to embark upon the challenges of everyday life. It provides strength in dealing with the many issues everyone faces outside their relationship. Many people report that developing an honest relationship with their spouse helped them to communicate more honestly in all their relationships.*

(end of excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*)

As indicated in the above quote, we settled into a life of not only "no secrets" with each other, but no substantial secrets from anyone. For instance, our relationship with our kids (who were 13 and 11 when we told them about the affairs and were 18 and 16 at the time we "went public") has continued to be one of openness and acceptance. And our extended family (including James's 97-year-old mother) all came to be very proud of the work we've done to help others.

Of course, our focus on Honesty also led to some significant changes in our friendships and social life. We found that most of our superficial friendships dropped away and our meaningful friendships deepened.

And we found that speaking openly and honestly about our experience with affairs led to changes in our work-life as well. From 1980 to 1985, we both spent a lot of time talking about affairs in workshops and speeches and making hundreds of Media Appearances.

The experience of going public (and together facing the various reactions) led us to grow even closer together and strengthened our bond. But by 1985 both our personal life and our work life had undergone changes—and we were ready for a new stage of life. Our kids were grown and on their own, so we decided to move from our home in Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, to Southern California.

Many people have challenged how we could just "pick up and move" like that. And while we didn't have any financial security, we judged the trade-offs worthwhile. In fact, in making this decision we used the formal process we had used back in 1973 when we moved from Pittsburgh to Hilton Head.

This move turned out to be a wonderful decision—and drew us even closer as we made a "new life" here. In fact, I particularly flourished in this environment because no one knew me (or anything about my work with affairs), so I had about a couple of years of being very low-key. This was a nice break after having been so public for several years.

That changed in 1987 when the Donahue show called, pressing me to be on again. (This was still before others were speaking publicly.) I finally agreed, and used that as motivation to start writing another book, based on all that I had learned from the hundreds of people who had contacted me since reading "Beyond Affairs" in 1980.

So two years later, in 1989, the first edition of "The Monogamy Myth" was published. This led to another round of publicity (which James shared with me), which then led to hearing from even more people who were suffering and struggling alone.

Some people might think that the ongoing focus on affairs (and reviewing our own personal experience) might be tough on our marriage, but just the opposite was true. All our work has brought us closer together. Of course, it's not just because of the joint work; it's because of the depth of the honesty in our relationship that allows us to fully know each other.

By 1996 we launched this website—and the rest, as they say, is history. James devotes himself mainly to our other website, LifeDesign101.com (which includes some wonderful "inspirational" Slide Shows that he posts weekly on the site).

In fact, James and I sit at side-by-side desks in our home office as we do our work, and we both thoroughly enjoy what we're doing. But so much "togetherness" can get to be too much of good thing and we both enjoy alone-time, so we try to arrange our activities to allow each of us to enjoy some quiet time. At age 69 (no jokes), we are both healthy and fit and active; James still plays a lot of tennis and I visit the local Y about 5 days a week. Generally, we live simply now, preferring to avoid the kind of business travel and public appearances we've done for so many years.

Most important, we're surrounded by our immediate family. As I mentioned, we moved to Southern California in 1985 (so we've been here 20 years). Our daughter married and moved out here with her husband in 1986. And our son moved out here in 1996. (In fact, without him there would be no website—because his technical expertise made it possible.) And our daughter and her husband have 3 wonderful daughters, and my grandchildren keep me "young at heart."

I don't want this to sound like some kind of fairy-tale existence. It's not. Everyone has problems—and we've had our share. I had breast cancer in 1992 and James had prostate cancer in

1994. And two years ago our son had an emergency angioplasty and a stent while having a heart attack, and two days later our daughter's house burned down in the Southern California wild fires. But crises come to everyone, so the real challenge is "how do you deal with the crisis?"

All in all... my life and my marriage are good—but certainly it's not the life I would ever have envisioned for myself. In fact, an early reviewer of *The Monogamy Myth*, who gave the book a very positive review, made a personal comment that pretty much sums it up:

"When some women's husbands have affairs, they get a divorce. Others stay married, but suffer in silence. Peggy Vaughan's husband had affairs—and she made a career out of it!"

If anyone *still* wants to know more about our marriage and our lives (you gluttons for punishment)... you can check out the "About Us" section of the website.

## How can I deal with my anger and feel loving again?

### Question #1:

*Anger; loss of joy in life... After being married 21 years and 7 children, my husband had an affair for 4 years. Now he is faithful and wants to live "happily ever after".... only the "after" is no longer happy for me. How is it possible to hate someone who you love so much. Please, I know forgiveness is a choice. I have forgiven him and am still in the marriage - only the marriage is no longer joyful to me when every time I am with him it is a reminder of my pain, especially during lovemaking.*

### Question #2:

*I am at a crossroad to stay or to go. The loving feelings are not coming back and I find the anger staying. Is there a way to move from "who cares?" to "let's work harder on this?"*

### Peggy's Response:

After discovering an affair, the strong emotions often take over and dictate a person's actions. This can feel overwhelming and lead to feeling there's no way to either understand or change this pattern.

Part of the difficulty in breaking through the anger in order to feel loving toward your spouse may be because of some ambivalence in really wanting to change the feelings. Despite a "rational" desire to change, "emotionally" there may still be some reluctance—due to the pain and, in some way, "honoring" the pain by not letting go of it. (Anger is often just another way of expressing pain.)

Also, it may be difficult to let go of the anger partly because you feel you "deserve" to be able to vent the anger—and feel if you stop venting the anger and begin being more loving that it's somehow "making it easy" for the spouse and/or "letting them off the hook."

There's also often a feeling that it's "unfair" to have to be careful in how you speak to your spouse, given the pain they have caused you. While you may deserve to be able to rant and rave and express your anger in any way you choose, it's important to realize that doing so means you're sabotaging yourself and "your own best interests."

It's not so much that you "should" change; it's just that it's "smart" to change—if you want to get what you want. (Most people want their spouse to hear their pain and understand how deeply they have been hurt. However, expressing anger does just the opposite; it actually prevents your spouse from being able to hear your feelings.)

I want to be clear that trying to communicate calmly doesn't mean pretending you don't have these strong feelings. You can still acknowledge the feelings, but simply "describe" them rather than "acting them out."

Of course, while working to get control of your anger, it's also important to begin to plug into some positive loving feelings that have almost certainly been "buried" under the pain/anger. As you gradually express less anger, you're likely to find the angry feelings diminishing to the point that you can get back in touch with the loving feelings.

For more on both these issues, see these Articles posted on my website: "Getting control of anger and other emotions" and "Recovering those "loving feelings" after an affair."

## What about renewing our marriage vows?

*Question:*

*My husband and I disagree about a recommitment ceremony (renewing marriage vows). For me it means a commitment to see this through, to dedicate to be there for each other, for him it means a celebration to be done after the healing is through. I am the injured party. I feel rejected by his idea because I do not know when the healing will be through. I can not predict when these feelings come up. I would like a ceremony soon as a stepping stone to progress. How do I get him to see my side?*

*Peggy's Response:*

Both sides of the above debate are understandable and express legitimate feelings. But an even bigger problem is assigning so much significance to the idea of a recommitment ceremony—regardless of when it's held. We tend to put far more emphasis on the symbols of our commitment than on the actions that demonstrate that commitment.

Another example is the way we emphasize what happens (or fails to happen) on Valentine's Day. Just as whatever is said or done on Valentine's Day is not a reflection of the true status of the relationship, so also "renewing marriage vows" is not a reflection of the actual status of the relationship. In other words, just as the initial wedding ceremony (and the vows expressed at that time) were not sufficient to guarantee the future... a recommitment ceremony is also not a guarantee.

Frankly, if and when there is a recommitment ceremony, I strongly encourage making the commitment to Honesty rather than just re-making the vows of monogamy. For more about the importance of honesty, see the article on the website with titled: "Honesty!"

Below is an excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth* with more discussion of this issue:

### *DON'T TRUST A PROMISE OF MONOGAMY*

*Most people feel that rebuilding trust in a partner who had an affair depends on their mate promising to be monogamous in the future.*

*It's understandable that they want some kind of reassurance, but a promise of monogamy is no guarantee (as is clear from the fact that this promise is assumed to be part of the wedding vows, which have already been broken).*

*Monogamy doesn't depend on a one-time decision, whether it's made at the beginning of a relationship or following an affair. Even if a person intends to be monogamous when they make that commitment, it doesn't mean they won't change their thinking at some future time. When there's only a promise of monogamy, there's no way to determine when a person's thinking is changing and they are moving toward the possibility of an affair.*

*If there's no security in a promise of monogamy, this still leaves the problem of finding a way to overcome the fears and doubts that most people feel after dealing with a partner's affair.*

### *A COMMITMENT TO HONESTY*

*The way to rebuild trust is not by making a promise of monogamy, but by making a commitment to honesty. There's a tendency to think of honesty only as telling something that was previously kept secret. But the main power of honesty is in sharing feelings. When a couple share their deepest feelings about everything, including the "scary" stuff (like*

*attractions to other people or fears of their partner having an affair), they develop a deeper understanding of each other. Many people think that talking about such emotional issues will inevitably cause problems. But it's far more likely that it will lead to a closer relationship because of the comfort involved in feeling you will be told the truth about anything that comes up.*

#### *NEW HOPE FOR MONOGAMY*

*The hope for monogamy lies in making a conscious choice that specifically involves a commitment to honesty. In making this choice, both partners realize that attractions to others are likely, indeed inevitable, no matter how much they love each other. So they engage in ongoing honest communication about the reality of the temptations and how to avoid the consequences of acting on those temptations. The effect on the relationship is to create a sense of closeness and a knowledge of each other that replaces suspicion with trust, making it more likely that it will be monogamous.*

*Most people would prefer to be able to get this settled once and for all, but dealing with the issue of monogamy is an ongoing process, not something that can be established on the basis of one discussion or one promise.*

(end of excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*)

## Can I ever respect my spouse again?

*Question:*

*Is it possible to ever find the respect one should have for their spouse after they have cheated. Respect is so important, and once it has been demolished, what then?*

Peggy's Response:

This is an often-felt, but seldom expressed, issue—losing respect for the spouse who had an affair. In fact, the issue of respect is seldom the dominate feeling in the beginning. The overwhelming focus is on the feelings of pain and/or anger rather than on loss of respect.

So it's likely that a spouse who is directing their attention on the way they no longer respect the one who had the affair is actually a sign of some progress and desire to move forward. But once you do shift to considering how you're going to relate in the future (re: respect and other "character" issues), this can seem like an insurmountable problem.

I want to offer three ideas that might help in dealing with the issue of respect.

First, the lack of respect is likely to be primarily based on a feeling of disbelief and disappointment that your spouse would have an affair, leading you to feel that they are not who you thought they were. We used to think that affairs only happened to "bad people in bad marriages." But we now know that affairs also happen to "good people in good marriages." So our previous assumption that our spouse would be monogamous was based more on assumption than on the reality that anyone can be vulnerable to an affair—even otherwise "good" people. So the lack of respect felt after discovering an affair primarily represents the gap between our assumptions and the reality of affairs today.

Second (and closely related) is the way we tend to "throw the baby out with the bathwater" when it comes to assessing our spouse as a total person. It may help to stop and reflect on the other positive aspects of your spouse that you have always admired—and that haven't changed just because of the affair. We tend to filter everything about our feelings toward our spouse based on this one (albeit) huge mistake—and ignore all their other positive qualities that may not have changed. Despite having had an affair, you may still be able to acknowledge their other qualities that continue to deserve respect. While the affair is obviously significant, it does not "define" who they are as a total person.

Third, when the spouse who had an affair demonstrates a sincere and sustained effort to do everything possible to make amends for what they have done, you may gradually be able to respect them again. In other words, you can find a new kind of respect based on what they do to deal with the affair. For instance, they may learn from their mistakes and use the learnings to become a better person. In fact, the "best" people are usually those who have been tested and failed, but then rose to prove themselves anew. In the final analysis, it's not what mistakes we make in life that define us; it's how we deal with those mistakes. So there is hope that someone who has been hurt by an affair may one day respect their spouse again.

## Which issue should be addressed first?

*Question:*

*What if the person who has the affair, entered into it with other emotional baggage, that had nothing to do with the spouse, lets say, grudge against parents from childhood. Does the person need to take care of that issue first, before the couple can go to therapy together?*

Peggy's Response:

If dealing with an affair must wait until after people deal with all their "other emotional baggage"... very little would ever get accomplished—because everyone has emotional baggage of one sort or another.

One of the biggest problems with the idea of needing to deal with childhood baggage before dealing with the affair is that it erroneously implies that the affair was caused by the baggage. While childhood problems may lead to personal struggles in life, they do not dictate our adult thinking and behavior. However, some people can't seem to resist using such experiences as an excuse for poor behavior.

So while some emotional baggage is more serious than others (and might call for a more careful evaluation of the timing of fully delving into the issues around the affair)—a "grudge against parents from childhood" does not even come close to qualifying as a legitimate reason to delay dealing with the affair. In fact, using this as an excuse sounds more like procrastination, rationalization, and manipulation than anything else.

In general, while it's reasonable to be considerate of a spouse's other personal struggles (whether baggage from childhood, depression, rape/sexual assault, etc.), 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—like an affair. So the best approach is to avoid an either-or mentality (of dealing first with one issue and later with the other)—but instead to focus on the affair while also dealing with any other individual issues that need attention.

### **More about a situation where the person who had an affair is also depressed:**

I'm not an expert on depression, but I'm unaware of evidence that depression causes 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, unless it is a previously diagnosed case of "clinical depression" and the doctor says otherwise, it's reasonable to deal with both issues simultaneously—rather than allowing the depression to interfere with facing and dealing with the affair.

Frankly, 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. And the longer the delay in dealing with the affair, the more overwhelming it may feel for everyone involved.

### **Two special (potentially dangerous) issues—spousal battery or suicide:**

When dealing with issues with the potential for dangerous physical consequences, an expert in these areas needs to be consulted before determining whether dealing with an affair can be pursued or needs to be delayed. Only an expert can determine the degree to which threats are real or are just being used to avoid dealing with the affair.

The bottom line is to determine the degree of validity of any argument people use when their affairs are discovered. For instance, is it a genuine personal crisis or simply a convenient technique for deflecting attention away from what they have done and the pain they have caused by their affair.

## How do I keep my anger from pushing him away?

*Question:*

*I am having a hard time controlling my anger towards my partner, we can talk about the affair then something will set me off and I lose my temper, or I confront him at inappropriate times about the affair. Today he called me with good news, and I had been upset about a missing condom and I confronted him. All it did was ruin the good news and make him feel bad by me once again. I am afraid I am pushing him away with my anger and mistrust, when I need him to want to be my support.*

**Peggy's Response:**

The writer of this question has already taken the first step toward dealing with the impact of her anger—simply by recognizing and acknowledging that it is defeating any hope of getting what she want/needs from her spouse.

You may feel you "deserve" to be as angry as you wish, as often as you wish, and at any time you wish, and you may feel it's terribly "unfair" to try to control your anger. But when it comes to dealing with all the ramifications of an affair, the better course of action is to do what is "smart" rather than what you think you "should" be able to do. (And it's clearly smart to try to get control of your anger.)

The reason this is so important is not to "be nice" or to "make it easy" on your spouse. It's in order to have the best chance of getting what *you* want. Getting angry all the time just works against your own best interests. It's hard enough to work through all the difficulties related to a partner's affair without sabotaging yourself by doing things you know will make things worse instead of better.

So when you feel the urge to lash out, try to pause long enough to focus on the likely results of doing so—which is that you won't get what you want. What most people want (as described in this question) is for their spouse to hear their pain and understand how deeply they have been hurt. However, expressing anger does just the opposite; it actually prevents your spouse from being able to hear your feelings.

In fact, your anger makes it almost impossible for the other person to focus on your feelings. The attack is more likely to lead them to focus on themselves—and feel sorry for themselves that they are once again being attacked. They're likely to begin to feel this anger/attack will never end—so why bother.

I know it's hard to hold back the intense feelings of anger, and it's unreasonable to pretend you don't feel angry. It's just that "acting out" your feelings is so counterproductive. So it's worth trying to simply acknowledge the feelings by "describing" them rather than lashing out. The more calmly you can describe your anger (and the pain behind the anger), the more your feelings are likely to be heard—and the more likely you are to "get through" to your spouse.

Even with the best of intentions, it may seem impossible to hold back the angry attacks—and no one will be perfect at it. But you can begin by only showing your anger when it is in direct response to a current statement or action rather than lashing out over and over about past words or deeds that cause anger. (So while it may be appropriate to display anger about something like "a missing condom," it needs to be handled as a separate issue at a different time—not thrown out in the middle of what might be an exchange that could build a (rare) new positive experience in the middle of so much difficulty.

Naturally, it's extremely hard to be rational when the emotions are so strong. But it's critical to use as much rational thinking/reading/talking as possible in order to get more understanding and perspective about affairs in general and your situation in particular. As you are more and more able to think clearly, you'll be more capable of controlling your emotions.

One way to help that process along is to watch the words you use. Are they "trigger" words (words that are guaranteed to trigger an emotional response)—or are they more rational, problem-solving type words that diminish the likelihood of an emotional reaction? While I'm not a fan of most of the communication "techniques" out there, I do think a concept called T.A. (Transactional Analysis) can be helpful.

This is a communication "tool" that can help in breaking through the cycle of anger, reaction, frustration, and feeling even worse. In fact, there is a article permanently posted on the website titled: "Using T.A. in Dealing with Affairs." (This article includes my own personal experience in finding T.A. to be extremely useful.)

Also, see another article on the website titled: "Getting Control of Anger and other Emotions."

Finally, as I have said many times, the chances for rebuilding a marriage depend on the prospects for the future of the marriage after discovery of the affair rather than any of the specific aspects of the affair itself. So the prospects for rebuilding the marriage depend on both people doing their best to deal with this mess in the most effective way possible. That means that in expecting your spouse to "do their best," it's important to "do your best" as well, which includes trying to get more control over your anger.

## Still married, but feel divorced?

### *Question:*

*It has been 3 years since his affair and we are more open and honest and secure than any time in our relationship. My problem is that I feel he divorced me when he slept with her and I just can't wear my rings, have an anniversary etc. I feel being together out of choice than from a breakable written contract is more honest. I believe in us, but the affair took my belief in the forever promise (and a lot more). Am I off base? He is very unhappy about my feelings.*

### Peggy's Response:

First, I want to say that I personally understand the sentiments expressed in the above question. We also experienced a much more open, honest and secure relationship after dealing with the affairs. And while I greatly valued that (and was clearly committed to him and to our relationship), I honestly considered the possibility of getting a divorce while continuing to live our lives together as a couple—just to make the point that I was with him because I wanted to be with him, not just "because we were married."

So I began thinking of our marriage as a "new marriage" - that began the day he told me about the affairs and we committed to rebuilding our relationship. In fact, here is an excerpt from the Introduction of *The Monogamy Myth*: "The day my husband told me about his affairs has become very important for us, in many ways more important than our wedding anniversary. While it was a day that turned my world upside down, it's one that we still celebrate today, after all these years. It's not the day itself we're celebrating; rather, it was the honesty that began that day."

Beginning at that time, I no longer wore my original wedding ring (and neither did he), but we both got special rings for each other that we've worn every day since that time (over 30 years ago). As for celebrating, we celebrate *both* "anniversaries." We privately celebrate the beginning of our "new relationship," but we also celebrate our original anniversary—which is still important because it was the very beginning of something that has now lasted (with all its ups and downs) for 50 years!

If you would like to read more about our personal history, check out the links to the pages on the site About Us. (You'll find the "About Us" listing on the Blue Bar of the Home Page.)

So perhaps the best way to avoid feeling "divorced" is to recognize that the old version of your marriage may be over, but the marriage as a whole is not over. It's just that now it is a new, hopefully better (more open and honest) version of your marriage.

Most of our early assumptions about marriage included a kind of "blind trust," so losing that blind trust is not a real loss. Now you can develop a different kind of trust based on ongoing honesty, allowing you to really know each other on a deeper level. So rather than mourning the end of the old marriage, it's much better to focus on the prospects for a marriage in the future that is far better than the original version.

## What's the difference between "love" and being "in love?"

### Question:

Would you explain the true nature of the common response "I love you, but I'm not in love with you?" It appears to be a contradiction in terms.

### Peggy's Response:

This is surely one of the most frustrating parts of dealing with a partner who has an affair—comprehending what they mean when they say "I love you, but I'm not *in love* with you."

Unfortunately, we've come to think of being "in love" as the exciting, heady feelings of "*falling in love*." That's *not* accurate—because it ignores the changing nature of love. "Lasting" love is quite different from "new" love.

Here are some excerpts from our book, *Making Love Stay* that explain more about "love." (I've also inserted some comments as to how this relates specifically to extramarital affairs).

#### *The Changing Nature of Love*

*Love changes; it never remains the same... Falling in love, or "new love," produces some of the most intense feelings a person ever experiences—but it's important to recognize that much of the intensity of the feeling is inherent in its newness and novelty. [This is what happens in an affair; it's "new" and "novel," but it's just the first stage of love and won't last.] It either changes to a lasting feeling of "love" or it withers completely. So saying "I love you" may reflect the feelings more common to a longer, more mature love rather than the "in love" feelings of the first stage of love.*

*Long-term, marital love is simply different (not less) than the new "in love" feelings of some affairs. Unfortunately, we have generally failed to appreciate this difference. Lasting love can have its own unique form of intensity and excitement, both of which emerge from a deeper knowledge of yourself and your partner. Eventually, in the best relationships, lasting love is based on the pleasure of full openness to another person—without anxiety, uncertainty, or fear. It surrounds you with a feeling that is both calming and deeply satisfying. In fact, it touches you at your very center and gives you a special sense of the worth of life itself.*

(end of the excerpt from *Making Love Stay*.)

The "in love" of an affair is simply the first heady stage of love. It doesn't last—because that first stage of love never lasts indefinitely. Love simply begins that way. Over time it changes. That's what we mean by the "changing nature of love."

So in dealing with the confusion around the difference between "love" and being "in love," it's important to understand the various stages of love—and not assume that love just means that first flush of "in love" feelings that can happen in an affair or in the beginning of any new relationship.

## What about "love" vs. "in love?"

*Question:*

*My husband and I are separated after his two year affair. He says that there is no doubt that he loves me but he doesn't know if he's in love with me. How can I help him understand that "in love" comes and goes in a lifetime marriage and I cannot offer him that constantly? He was "in love" with her, he says.*

**Peggy's Response:**

I continue to hear this same dilemma expressed over and over—thinking the "in love" feelings in an affair are somehow special (or meaningful or significant). So although I've addressed this issue many times in the past, I'll again offer some perspective that may be helpful.

Many people have come to think of the initial feelings of “romantic love” as the real thing. While there may be no way to convince someone who holds this fantasy in their heads, it's important to recognize that this initial feeling is *not* "real love."

With this perspective, it's somewhat easier to avoid feeling threatened by a partner's *feelings* that they are "in love." However, there's really no comparison between the initial feelings of being "in love" (that sometimes happen in an affair) with the lasting *love* in a long-term relationship. It's a little like comparing apples and oranges.

In dealing with the confusion about "real love," it's important to understand the various stages of love—and not assume that love just means that first flush of "in love" feelings that can happen in an affair or in the beginning of any new relationship.

It may take some time for someone who has been caught up in the fantasy of a new feeling to recognize that it wasn't really "special"—just "new." But in the meantime, it can help the spouse who may feel threatened by this "new love" to remember that it's only a stage that doesn't last.

## Hope for rebuilding a better marriage?

### *Question:*

*I am 18 months into living and accepting and rebuilding our marriage after my husband's affair. I am sure any spouse would agree this is by far the most gut wrenching pain that you probably didn't know was possible (aside from the death of a child). I feel we are in our second marriage. Far more intimate and more careful. We still argue but reconcile sooner and with more depth. For instance, after a recent argument he called my cell phone while I was shopping to apologize for his actions that morning. I do feel fortunate.*

### *Peggy's Response:*

While there is no "question" in the above letter, it was submitted for this column—and I felt it was important to use this example of what's possible. There's a tendency to think that recovering from an affair means simply being able to "survive" the experience and hopefully stabilize the marriage. So it can be a positive motivation to know that some couples go far beyond simply surviving, and actually create a better relationship than they had before this happened.

(It's helpful to realize that while no one would choose to go through this ordeal, it is possible to develop a stronger relationship if this crisis is used to develop a deeper connection based on responsible honesty.)

When someone is in the early stages of dealing with the devastating emotional impact of a partner's affair, it's difficult to hear that it's possible (with lots of time and effort by both people) to eventually come through this with a stronger marriage. On the other hand, it can be helpful to understand that it's *possible* for this to happen. Recovery doesn't *have* to mean simply "surviving;" it can actually mean "thriving."

## Can a marriage grow stronger after an affair?

*Question:*

*This isn't a question but a phrase that means a lot to me after my wife had several affairs. It may help to use sometimes when the relationship is worth saving: "Gold and Diamonds are created by heat and pressure" It really relates to how the marriage can grow stronger.*

Peggy's Response:

It's always a little dangerous to suggest that a marriage can actually become stronger after an affair—because some people will use this as a way of "justifying" an affair, saying that it "helped" the marriage. I have *never* seen an affair "help" a marriage. What does sometimes happen (as happened with us) is that the work we did together—and the rock-bottom commitment to honesty that we made together—did force a stronger bond than we had had before. It wasn't the affairs that helped our marriage—they could just as easily have destroyed it—it was the way we dealt with this crisis that made it possible for us to grow stronger as a couple.

This is true of any life crisis. It can destroy you or it can strengthen you. (Christopher Reeves, just one of many examples, comes to mind.) So it is with a marital crisis like affairs. It, too, can destroy your relationship—or it can lead to actions that wind up strengthening it. (For more on this concept, see the Article about Affairs on my website titled: Life Crises: Extramarital Affairs and Cancer.)

Once we worked through James's affairs (a process that took 2 to 3 years), we developed a relationship that was stronger than it had ever been before the affairs—and probably stronger than it ever would have been without having faced this and dealing with it together. This is *not* to say I would have voluntarily gone through this experience in order to have the relationship that we developed, but it certainly helps to put the whole experience in perspective.

## MEN AND WOMEN HAVE SAME ISSUES

### Help and support for men!?

*Question:*

*Despite searching for several months, all the information/websites I have found seem to deal with the female partner's point of view when discussing affairs. I have yet to find a site which offers support to the man who has been "cheated on." Can you help??*

Peggy's Response:

I receive a lot of letters from men whose wives had affairs. Many people do not realize how prevalent this is—or how many men try to work through it to stay in the marriage. In fact, during the past decade, about 40% of the people who have contacted me have been men whose wives had affairs.

Since there are many, many men struggling to deal with their wife's affair, my work has always addressed *both*. So I find it astounding that this question was submitted to my website. I can only assume that the man who wrote it has not read *The Monogamy Myth*, the Articles about Affairs that are posted on the website or the many previous Questions—which have been submitted by both men and women.

I long ago recognized that the person having an affair (whether the husband or the wife) exhibits similar behaviors, including the secrecy, deception, and resistance to answering questions once discovered. At the same time, the spouse (whether the husband or wife) exhibits similar behaviors, including feelings of devastation and of struggling to recover and rebuild the marriage.

Several years ago when I had a message board on the website, it became obvious that men and women experienced a spouse's affair in much the same way. In fact, if you removed the name of the person posting the message, along with references to husband or wife, it was virtually impossible to determine whether any given message was written by a man or a woman.

Among those who have made appointments for telephone consulting with me during the past year, about one-third have been men. So while men may be more reluctant to let friends or family know of their struggle with a wife's affair, they do take advantage of opportunities to get help and support in dealing with this issue.

In addition, the Survey on Affairs that I conducted through my website was open to both men and women. In fact, 25% of the 1,083 respondents to the survey were men, and their answers were extremely similar to those of the women who responded—including the fact that they provided identical responses to the question about the current status of marriage to spouse who had affair(s):

--76% of the men reported still being married to their wife who had an affair

--76% of the women reported still being married to their husband who had an affair.

Also, the results of the survey showed that overwhelmingly, both sexes wanted to know details of the affair. They healed and developed trust in the same proportions, and the same percentage (44%) felt their relationship had "improved" since the affair.

Finally, here's an excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth* in which I describe the universality of this issue.

One development related to affairs (which many people still tend to ignore) is that this has become an "equal opportunity" problem in that both men and women regularly face this devastating experience. ...there is virtually NO difference between men and women in their efforts to cope with a partner's affair—or in their ability to be supportive of others in similar circumstances. Unfortunately, there has been very little support available to help men in working on these issues; but since *The Monogamy Myth* is not slanted toward one sex or the other, it is a resource for all alike.

(end of excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*)

So while I was saddened by the fact that the writer of this question failed to realize that all my work is aimed at helping and supporting *both* men and women whose spouses have had affairs, I appreciate this opportunity to clarify that this is my goal and the focus of all my efforts.

## Men dealing with wives' affair?

### Question #1:

*My wife met and fell in love with a co-worker and wants a divorce but we have talked and she changes her thinking all the time till finally she told me she was just grieving our marriage. Our divorce is in one week and she has stopped talking to me and has her boyfriend practically living in our house for the past two months. Should I give up on us?*

### Question #2:

*My wife's affairs occurred 20 years ago. I'm still recovering. My wife continues to blame me for the affairs claiming the way I treated her at the time lead to her affairs. I have had to drag everything out of her, even calling the 3rd party, to get information. I am finally tired of trying to get the truth. Should I just give up or give her one final demand for the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.*

### Question #3:

*My wife recently, in the last month and a half asked for a separation. I said why? I thought that we were doing just fine. she stood her ground and I had to accept. One week later she told me she was seeing a man (in the same neighborhood). I knew this man before she did and introduced her to him. I asked if she had committed adultery. She wouldn't tell me. Well, right away I knew that she did. My wife is 47 years old and we have been married for 17 years.*

### Question #4:

*My wife's low self-esteem is ruining our marriage. Her affair started when a coworker lent an ear to her problems and took advantage of her when he saw her low self-esteem. Now she is once again searching for compliments from other men and tells me that what I think doesn't matter. How can I get her to listen to my compliments and stop searching for others?*

### Question #5:

*I found out my wife has had three affairs in the past 5 years. She finally revealed a pretty devastating detail after months of denials and now I feel like I can't trust her with answers to the questions I still have. I feel like I'm back at square one and stuck there since I don't feel I can believe her answers the first time I ask. How do I go forward now? Should I put my trust in her anymore?*

### Peggy's Response:

Before addressing some of the specific issues raised in the above questions, I want to focus on the overall issue of men dealing with their wives' affairs. There has been far more attention paid to women dealing with their husbands' affairs than men dealing with their wives' affairs—but as is clear from the above questions, the pain is the same.

The analysis of the results of my Survey on Affairs illustrates the similarities between men and women on this point. (To see an overview of the results, go to the website, to the “Therapists” section and click on the “Survey” link on the Blue Bar.

Here are the responses to questions about dealing with pain, broken down by gender:

*--56% of men and 55% of women said: "Yes, it's still a pain I carry every day."*

*--30% of men and 33% of women said: "While I still think about it from time to time, it's not a constant focus."*

--14% of men and 12% of women said: "No, I've pretty much put it in perspective in my life and moved on."

In fact, for many men the problem is compounded by the fact that they are even more hesitant than women to reach out for help because they so desperately want to avoid others finding out. Some men become obsessed with the idea of keeping their experience secret from others. One man said this was his most pressing concern, that, in fact, he had become almost paranoid about other people "knowing."

Here's an excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth* about the special problem for men:

Traditionally, men have been conditioned to hide their feelings, so when a man faces the fact that his partner has had an affair, it's not surprising that he doesn't talk about it. But a person needs to be able to talk about what has happened in order to recover a sense of equilibrium after discovering their partner's affair. When they try to deal with it alone, they often become even more frustrated and confused.

(end of excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*)

Here are some more results from my Survey on Affairs related to talking:

In response to the question, "Who did you talk to?"

--24% of men and 11% of women said *no one* (twice as many men as women).

In response to the question: "How much did you talk to friends/family/others (NOT including professionals)?"

--33% of men and 18% of women said *not at all* (again almost twice as many men as women not talking).

The isolation makes it far more difficult for men to come to grips with what has happened and to think clearly about how to deal with it. So while it's good that the men who submitted these questions at least reached out in this way, this forum can be helpful only in providing "perspective"—but it does not address the greater need for men to reach out to someone for ONGOING support as they deal with all this.

Now...to address some of the specific issues raised in the above questions:

*Regarding Question #1: "Should I give up on us?"*

While the situation (with an impending divorce) doesn't sound hopeful, the fact that his wife "changes her thinking all the time" does offer some glimmer of hope. In the final analysis, it's up to each person to decide for themselves when to "give up." (Some people have much more tolerance and/or patience than others.) However, if someone doesn't *want* to give up, then it's reasonable to continue to hope things change—while *also* getting on with life in case it doesn't. For both men and women, it's important to feel satisfied with whatever efforts you have made before giving up. That way, you don't second-guess yourself that you "could've, should've done more." It's not just the final outcome, but how you can *live* with the final outcome that makes the most difference in the long-term.

*Regarding Question #2: "Should I just give up [trying to get the truth] or give her one final demand for the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth" and Question #3 that simply describes how the wife won't tell the truth.*

I would never recommend "giving up" because trying to bury the desire for the truth simply buries it alive—and it keeps coming back forever. In fact, it's wise to make it clear to the spouse that you will never give up and this will never go away until it's dealt with. To continue this effort, it might help to read (and re-read) a couple of pages under the "Articles about Affairs" section of the website titled "The Need to Know" and "Talking about Affairs."

*Regarding Question #4:* [Re: the wife's low self-esteem] "How can I get her to listen to my compliments and stop searching for others?"

This effort is somewhat of a losing proposition in that the *self* in self-esteem means that no one else can really *give* her self-esteem; she needs to do it herself. Not only can the husband not give her self-esteem, but the "other men" can't either, except in a very temporary way that does nothing to actually raise her self-esteem. So the best effort might be to try to encourage her to find *other* ways to feel good about herself; to do things that raise her own opinion of herself. This is ultimately the only way to raise her self-esteem and the effort that is likely to pay off much more than any effort to constantly compliment her. She needs to do something to actually *deserve* the compliments in order to actually feel good about herself.

*Regarding Question #5:* "How do I go forward now? Should I put my trust in her anymore?"

Neither going forward nor "trusting again" can be done quickly. Trust is not a decision (so it can't be "bestowed"). Trust comes as a byproduct of behavior that is trustworthy (so it must be "earned"). This behavior includes establishing a new history of ongoing honest communication about everything relevant to the relationship. This is why it is a long process that takes time; there are no short-cuts.

For more information about men dealing with their wives' affairs, see the article under the "Articles about Affairs" section of the website titled "Help and support for men!?"

## Dealing with my wife's affair?

*Question #1:*

*It has been 3 months since I found out about my wife's affair. He is a mutual friend. I know from reading many views on infidelity that this is not a very long time. The affair has lasted about 14 months. After having read your 2 books especially the parts on why a person would stay with a spouse who has betrayed them, I have come to the conclusion that I do want my wife forever. At this point in time, she still wants the relationship to continue. Is it salvageable?*

*Question #2:*

*My wife admitted to having an affair with a co-worker. We tried to reconcile, and she told me that she'd spend the rest of her life trying to make it up to me. Recently, I found out that she started to see her lover again. She says that she's in love with him, but at the same time, says that she still loves me. I have since moved back to my home state without her. She says that she misses me and wants to stay in contact with me. What do you make of this; it just does make any sense to me?*

*Question #3:*

*My wife had an affair for 3 months; it took her 6 months to tell me the truth, after I found the cell phone bills with his numbers. She pushed me away for 7 months, then apologized and wanted to move forward. A month later she came clean. Problem is we talked about it for a little while, but it's been only 6 months and she says I need to start trusting her more, and need to start letting it go. If she seemed more compassionate, I could. What should I do?*

*Question #4:*

*I was married for one year and my wife had sex with my best friend. The lesson I learned is to live alone and date who I want without love, without caring, without respect without responsibility; seems to work great until you NEED a relationship and to have that person be your friend, and as a friend seems to be the only way.*

**Peggy's Response:**

The above questions describe different issues—and I will address the issues separately. But I grouped them together for this week's response to highlight the fact that men struggle with their wives affairs just like women struggle with their husband's affairs. Unfortunately, many people still focus on the stereotype that it's *men* who have affairs and they presume that scenario in any mention of the subject of affairs.

As I have repeatedly pointed out, of the people who have contacted me during the past couple of decades, about 40% of them have been men dealing with a wife's affair. So in addressing the various issues related to affairs, I try to make it as clear as possible that it applies to both men and women. Of course, sometimes in responding to a specific question from a woman, some of the response may be couched in terms that reflect that particular situation, but I try to expand beyond whatever specific person wrote the question to focus on the larger issue which usually applies equally to men and women.

In addition to trying to make the information on my website applicable to both genders, all the information in *The Monogamy Myth* is aimed at helping both men and women. Even so, there are times when people think I'm focusing on women dealing with a husband's affair. (Part of that may be the simple fact of knowing that my personal experience is as a woman who had to deal with

her husband's affair.) But I encourage you to read a page posted on my website under the Articles about Affairs section titled "Help and support for men!?"

Now...to address some of the issues raised in the above questions:

Re: issues in Questions #1 and #2 as to whether there's any hope for the marriage when the wife is still seeing the "other man..."

*any* continuing contact with the third party has been shown to make it almost impossible to rebuild the marriage. Naturally, people can stay married if they choose to do so for practical reasons (like for the children), but it's likely to be a deadened, meaningless marriage. It's only after contact has been severed with the third party that any real "rebuilding" of the marriage can begin.

Of course, some people decide to have an "alternative lifestyle" marriage (sexually open marriage) where both people are free to have other partners. Even this path is usually only followed for a few years until one or both have too much difficulty dealing with it. But when it's "one-sided" (with only one person with an outside involvement - especially an involvement that began as a "secret affair"), it pretty much never works.

I'm sorry to sound so pessimistic, but please remember that I don't offer individual "advice" as to what any specific person should do. I only offer information and "perspective" as to what *usually* happens. It's all up to you because (as I've written before) in the final analysis, it's up to each person to decide for themselves when to "give up." (Some people have much more tolerance and/or patience than others.)

So if someone doesn't *want* to give up, then it's reasonable to continue to hope things change—while *also* getting on with life in case it doesn't. For both men and women, it's important to feel satisfied with whatever efforts you have made before giving up. That way, you don't second-guess yourself that you "could've, should've done more." It's not just the final outcome, but how you can *live* with the final outcome that makes the most difference in the long-term.

Regarding the issue in Question #3 as to his wife wanted him to "let it go" and trust her...

Many people erroneously think it's only men who resist talking and that women will talk—regardless of the situation. But both men and women having affairs usually try to avoid talking, and their spouses (both men and women) usually desperately want to talk. Whether it's the husband or the wife who has had an affair, it's absolutely essential for their spouse to get answers and talk through the situation in order to be able to "let go." As for "trusting," trust is not something you can bestow. It's a by-product of behavior - over time - that warrants trust. For more about the need to get answers and work through the whole situation, see the Articles about Affairs posted on my website titled: "The Need to Know" and "Talking about the Affairs."

Regarding the issue in Question #4 describing the cynicism following a wife's affair...

It's understandable, but sad, that people just "give up" on love, caring, etc., after being hurt by an affair. I suspect this reaction is just the emotions talking in the early stage of pain. Hopefully, with time and more understanding and perspective about the whole issue of love and affairs, there will come a time when the heart can be opened to the possibility of slowly, carefully, and deeply connecting with another person, building a friendship AND a long-term love.

Final thoughts...

The first two questions stimulate me to again remind everyone about a false stereotype that is unwarranted. Many people believe that most men get a divorce when they find out about a wife's affair. But the results of my Survey on Affairs showed that of those 1,083 who responded to the survey, the percentage of men and women who were still married to and living with the spouse

who had an affair was exactly the same: 76%. This is in keeping with many reports from therapists who deal with affairs. It's just that the general population is unaware of the efforts made by men to rebuild their marriages after a wife's affair.

But one similarity between men and women is undeniable: the pain that comes from this experience has nothing to do with gender. According to both my experience in working with this issue for over 20 years and the results of my survey, the feelings and emotions of the deceived partner are almost identical, regardless of whether it is the husband or the wife.

As more men (like those who wrote the above questions) become willing to acknowledge that this has happened to them, we'll be better able to break through all the false myths, stereotypes and assumptions people hold about affairs. This greater openness will allow everyone to become more aware of what is really going on in the "world of affairs," affecting both women and men.

## What about men's pain from wives' affairs?

### *Question:*

*I found out about my wife's affair from a message left on my office e-mail from her lover's wife. He was an old college boyfriend who called her because he was doing work in our area. She saw him for lunch and then ended up sleeping with him for about 1 year. Most of your questions are about how women deal with the husband's affairs not the other way around? My wife and I are doing better and talking a lot but I still have nightmares of her sleeping with another man.*

### Peggy's Response:

Unfortunately, many people still focus on the stereotype that it's men who have affairs and they presume that scenario in any mention of the subject of affairs. But as the above letter points out, anyone (either male or female) who learns of their spouse's affair is likely to be similarly devastated.

In fact, the pain that comes from this experience has nothing to do with gender. Based on both my experience in working with this issue for the past 25 years and the results of my Survey on Affairs, it's clear that the feelings and emotions of the deceived partner are almost identical.

For instance, when I used to have a message board, it was clear that the postings from men dealing with their wives' affairs were indistinguishable from the postings by women dealing with their husbands' affairs. (If you didn't read the name or the references to gender, you wouldn't be able to tell whether postings were by a man or a woman.)

Most men facing their wife's affair feel even more isolated than women facing their husband's affair. Women may be shocked upon learning of their husband's affairs, but in the back of their minds is the statement they've heard through the years that "boys will be boys." But most men are even more shocked than women when learning of their wife's affair—because they would never have believed it could happen.

But as more men become willing to acknowledge their wives' affairs, we'll be better able to break through all the false myths, stereotypes and assumptions people hold about affairs. This greater openness will allow everyone to become more aware of what is really going on in the "world of affairs," affecting both women and men.

In addressing the various issues related to affairs, I try to make it as clear as possible that the responses apply to everyone. I realize that sometimes in responding to a specific question from a woman, part of the response may be couched in terms that reflect that particular situation, but I try to expand beyond whatever specific person wrote the question to focus on the larger issue—which usually applies equally to men and women.

My goal is to provide the broadest possible perspective about any given issue so it can be useful to everyone. So in addition to trying to make the information on my website applicable to both genders, all the information in "The Monogamy Myth" is aimed at helping both husbands and wives who are facing this issue. And I will continue to try to keep this perspective in all my writing, books, articles, etc.

## Men dealing with wife's affair?

### Question #1:

*It has been 21 months since I found out about my wife's affair. She would not tell me who, I had to find that out on my own. The first few months she has answered my questions, but it is still difficult to discuss. I find myself holding back because she feels we have covered that enough and wants to move on. At times I find myself totally devastated by the things she must have said and done. How can I get beyond that?*

### Question #2:

*My wife left me and now lives with her past boyfriend of 6 years ago. I love her so deeply and I am devastated by the abandonment and the betrayal. He cheated on her when they were together numerous times. I loved her totally and was a good husband. I am hoping this affair will collapse. Can you give me any insight about it? Will this affair last, can I expect a collapse of the affair, anything. I love and miss her so much, my life is a shambles.*

### Peggy's Response:

I chose to focus on "women's affairs" this week to offer some balance to the still common stereotype of thinking of affairs in terms of *men* having affairs. While there has been a growing awareness of and focus on the issue of women's affairs in the past few years, there's still a long way to go to fully appreciate that the emotional impact is quite similar for both men and women.

I first saw this most clearly a number of years ago when I had a couple of message boards on the website. In reading the postings about the painful reactions to a spouse's affair... if you ignored the references to "husband" or "wife" and ignored the male or female name attached to the posting, you absolutely could not tell whether it was written by a man or woman. And in the BAN Support Group meetings, BAN members see firsthand how men and women both need the same kind of support in dealing with this issue.

Regarding the specific issue noted above: getting beyond the devastation...

Again, this is the same for both men and women—despite the fact that we have failed to fully appreciate that men can experience the same emotional upheaval as women. Contrary to stereotypes, men do not just react with anger or retaliation, but also suffer similar emotions of hurt, sadness and loss.

In fact, "devastated" is the single most common word all people (both men and women) use to describe their feelings. And, as for how to recover...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.

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 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. There's no length of time by which it will spontaneously cease to be a problem. But, as I have repeatedly said, even making a conscious effort to deal with the feelings, it normally takes at least two years to completely overcome the emotional impact of this experience.

It's also extremely helpful (actually almost essential if the marriage is to be rebuilt) to get answers to some of the questions about what happened. In the absence of knowing, most people can't get it out of their mind—which is understandable because the 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.

Since I recognize that men and women follow pretty much the same course in recovering from this experience, I have always tried to address *both* men's and women's affairs in my work. In fact, I consciously wrote "The Monogamy Myth" (first published 16 years ago) for both men and women dealing with a spouse's affair. It is *not* directed specifically to either gender, and many men have told me how it was one of the few things they found that was useful for them.

I've also written (and/or contributed to) a number of articles specifically dealing with women's affairs. Check the website for more:

Under the Articles about Affairs section:

- Women having Affairs - (drawing attention to the increase in women's affairs)
- Help and Support for Men - (focusing on the prevalence of men dealing with wife's affair)
- Office Affairs - (about the increase in women having affairs at work)

Under the Media Articles section:

- Newsweek Cover Story: "The Secret Lives of Women" (in which I'm quoted)
- New York Times Long Island Journal article: "High Infidelity" (in which I'm quoted)

## Do men leave when wife has affair?

*Question #1 (See 3 additional questions below)*

*Is it true that most men will divorce a woman who has committed adultery? (Note: this question refers to an article under the "Articles about Affairs" section of the website titled "Exposure of affairs of celebrities.")*

Peggy's Response:

The short, direct answer to this question is "No." While many people believe that most men will get a divorce when their wife has an affair, this is not the case. It's just that men are even more secretive about letting others know of their wife's affair than women are of letting others know about their husband's affair. Therefore the only time you may know about a wife's affair is if the husband *does* get a divorce. So you tend to think that this is what usually happens.

In fact, as I have pointed out in the past, the emotional impact on a man is extremely similar to the impact on a woman. Anyone who learns of their spouse's affair is likely to be similarly devastated—and is likely to be similarly inclined to try to understand what happened, why, and what can be done to salvage the marriage. When I used to have a message board, it was clear that the postings from men dealing with their wives' affairs were indistinguishable from the postings by women dealing with their husbands' affairs. (If you didn't read the name or the references to gender, you wouldn't be able to tell whether postings were by a man or a woman.)

So just because you don't know about men staying married after their wives' affairs doesn't mean it's not happening. In fact, there appears to be a significant increase in married women having affairs during the past couple of decades (partially due more "opportunity" due to increasing numbers of women in the workforce and then the advent of the Internet). And while there is still a greater "stigma" for husbands in disclosing this fact, it is happening more and more often.

So...not only does it happen to men, but (referring back to the original Question #1 above), most men do *not* seek a divorce. NOTE: I stated in my response to a previous Question that "when the person who had an affair remains undecided, it's usually the husband who doesn't want to give up either his wife/family or his affair partner." But that is a completely separate issue from this question as to whether "most men will divorce a woman who has had an affair." As I explained above, that's a false assumption often made due to lack of information about how many marriages survive—regardless of whether it's the husband or the wife who had an affair.

Here are several recent letters from men who have *not* left a wife who had an affair:

*Question #2:*

After suspecting for months and then finally "walking in" on them nearly a year ago, I'm still in limbo. She says that she wants to repair our marriage, but she's still seeing him. Now she has a PO box and cell phone to stay in touch with him. She tells me that I'm depressed, not too surprising since she's still seeing him. I've been asked *not* to tell his wife. Is it fair to his wife for her not to know? Should I be the one to tell her? Or am I just being vindictive?

*Question #3:*

After 3-years I had thought we were on our way back to trust. Now I was informed by his wife that she has proof that they had been chatting through a game site. I was copied with actual chat, my wife doesn't know why she did it. Is it time to throw in the towel? Married 18 years with 2

teenage kids. Can't believe this could happen again, am I just stupid or what... I don't know how much more my heart can take, my head says to move on but my heart wants to stay.

*Question #4:*

My wife was emailing a man (sharing sexual fantasies about each other), and wanted to have an affair. They didn't, but she feels that she had stronger passion for him, than she ever had with me. After much discussion she has agreed to work on us.. I feel cheated on, and betrayed that I had to convince her to work on us. Now we have to work on trusting, betrayal, lack of passion, commitment, etc.. seemingly insurmountable. Where do we start?

Peggy's Additional Comments:

All the perspective I offer in all my writing is aimed at *both* men and women, regardless of which gender is in the role of having the affair or being the hurt spouse. As I mentioned above, there is no significant difference in what's involved in recovering and rebuilding the marriage. It's just that we've assumed far more differences than actually exist. For more comments about the "similarities and differences" between men and women, see the article posted under the list of "Articles in the Media referring to Peggy's work" section of the website titled "Redbook Magazine" which featured the results of my Survey on Affairs.

I'd also like to point out that while it's clear from the questions posted the last couple of weeks that the one who had an affair may be undecided about whether to stay or leave, it's still overwhelmingly the "hurt spouse" who has the most difficulty deciding whether to stay married. To read an article about this posted under Articles about Affairs, see the article under the "Articles about Affairs" section of the website titled "Deciding whether to stay married or get a divorce."

For information on other aspects of this decision, including: ambivalence (as well as spouse's ambivalence), advice from others, the practical factors (like money and children), and other considerations for making a rational decision—see the book, specifically Chapter 9 "The Marriage/Divorce Dilemma."

*Regarding the specific questions raised in Question #2 above: "Is it fair to his wife for her not to know? Should I be the one to tell her? Or am I just being vindictive?"...*

I have written about this before, but will add a quick recap of some of the main points:

As with most aspects of dealing with affairs, this is a very complex question and calls for lots of clear thinking. While honesty is basically the better choice in life, it's only the best choice if it's "responsible honesty"—and this is highly questionable when it comes to telling the spouse of the third party.

Here are some questions to consider in thinking through the impulse to tell:

1. What are your motives?

Are you being completely honest with yourself or rationalizing about it? Any "telling" (if it's to be responsible) should be neither self-serving nor self-righteous.

2. What is the nature of your relationship with the person to be told?

Do you have a personal relationship with them and will you be there for them over the long haul as they deal with the repercussions of "knowing?"

3. What is your concern for the impact on *their* lives?

It's important to consider whether or not they *want* to be told. I know from my own experience that sometimes a person doesn't want to know, and it's not fair to force them to face it just because you think they ought to know.

4. What is likely to be the impact on *your* life? Do you think you'll "feel better" if they know? Most people not only don't feel better for having told; they usually feel worse for being the messenger of such painful information.

Any "telling" is best done when it is "disclosed" by the spouse who is having the affair—rather than being "exposed" by someone else. (Any real caring for the spouse of the third party would involve appealing to the third party to tell rather than taking it upon yourself.)

Naturally, each person will need to assess the situation for themselves in making a decision about telling the third party's spouse. But the first step involves making an honest appraisal of your motives and the likely fall-out, based on asking yourself the above questions and giving yourself some honest answers.

## How many men actually stay married after a wife's affair?

*Question:*

*My wife had an affair. I would never have believed she could do it. She's very sorry about it and says she loves me. I still love her too and want to hold on to the marriage, but how many men actually stay married after their wife has an affair?*

*Peggy's Response:*

Many people (perhaps including the man who wrote this question) believe that most men get a divorce when they find out about a wife's affair. But this is a stereotype that is unwarranted.

One of the reasons for this false assumption is that a couple is more likely to keep a wife's affair secret than they are to keep a husband's affair secret. This is partly due to the fact that men are more reluctant than women to have others know about their spouse's affair. Also, there is society's harsher attitudes toward women having affairs. And, finally, there is the greater desire/effort to keep a mother's affair secret from the children.

So people generally only hear about a wife's affair when the marriage does end. But when the couple stays married, their friends, acquaintances and co-workers may never know it happened. So by only knowing about a wife's affair when it ends in divorce, people assume that men usually divorce a wife who has an affair.

The results of my Survey on Affairs showed that of those 1,083 who responded to the survey, the percentage of men and women who were still married to and living with the spouse who had an affair was exactly the same: 76%. This is in keeping with many reports from therapists who deal with affairs. It's just that the general population is unaware of the efforts made by men to rebuild their marriages after a wife's affair.

The reasons a man may want to stay married are similar to those of a woman who wants to stay married after her husband's affair. To review some of the reasons people make this decision, go to my website and read one of the Articles about Affairs titled: "Why does a person stay with a spouse who has had an affair?"

The decision to stay married (regardless of whether it's the husband or the wife who has an affair) is usually dictated by what happens after the affair has been disclosed. The most critical factors are: being willing to answer questions, hanging in through the long process of dealing with the emotional fallout, and severing contact with the third party.

One similarity between men and women is undeniable: the pain that comes from this experience has nothing to do with gender. According to both my experience in working with this issue for over 20 years and the results of my survey, the feelings and emotions of the deceived partner are almost identical. The only significant difference is in the very first impact of learning the information: men are more likely to be shocked because (as stated in the above question) they would never have believed she could do it. This is primarily due to the fact that (while women can also be shocked by their husband's affairs), in the back of their minds is the statement they've heard through the years that "boys will be boys."

As more men become willing to acknowledge that this has happened to them, we'll be better able to break through all the false myths, stereotypes and assumptions people hold about affairs. This greater openness will allow everyone to become more aware of what is really going on in the "world of affairs," affecting both women and men.



## WHEN THE AFFAIR HAPPENED LONG AGO

### How long does it take?

*(I've received a number of questions about the difficulty of learning about affairs that happened many years ago. Here are two letters that illustrate this issue.)*

#### Question # 1:

*I was told about an affair 29 years after it had happened and our family is raised. Now I feel like our whole life together was "a fake." How long should it take to get over this? It has been 5 years now and I feel it bothers me more now than it did at first. Maybe I was in total shock then!*

#### Question # 2:

*On my 7th anniversary (that was 17 years ago), I received a call, saying: Your husband has a girlfriend—and there is not a DAY that goes by that I don't think about it. I have gone through counseling numerous times, and it doesn't help, and he won't talk about it. My heart is broken, I feel so lonely, I put on a great front but inside I'm crumbling. Now that the kids are gone, I feel like walking out the door, and not looking back. I love him so much it hurts and he knows that—but I can't live with it anymore.*

#### Peggy's Response:

While on the surface it would seem that dealing with an affair that happened many years ago might create different issues from learning of an affair that just happened—that's not the case. First of all, at the moment that someone learns of a spouse's affair (no matter *when* it happened), it's *as if* it just happened—because they just learned of it.

Unfortunately, since the person who had the affair has known about it so long, they may fail to appreciate that their spouse feels like it just happened. The one who had the affair may feel like it's "old news" and be even less likely to be willing to talk through it and work through it—but the spouse has the same need to get answers to their questions and to deal with what happened, regardless of when it happened.

As these two letters illustrate, even when people don't work through it, they may stay married—but the marriages are likely to be distant, or deadened, or meaningless. So it's important to go back and do whatever wasn't done to deal with the impact of the affair.

If this significant event in the marriage is never dealt with, someone can always make the decision to get out. But it's certainly worth making a concerted effort to go through the process of openly dealing with this issue before giving up, even after such a long time. (It's "better late than never.") And while it's a shame that there may have been many painful years without this kind of effort—and while there may still be a decision to leave the marriage—it's important to make an effort to deal with this issue before making a final decision about the marriage.

## Learning of Long-ago Affairs?

*Question #1:*

*My husband recently admitted a long-ago affair. It hurts as if it were yesterday. I can't find anything about this kind of situation. Help*

*Question #2:*

*Well here is a new one for you. I recently told my wife I had a one-time fling 6 years ago. I have tried to be a good husband and I have been completely devoted to my wife before and after. It was a moment of weakness. She is having a very hard time dealing with it. What should I do ?*

*Question #3:*

*30 years ago my husband had an affair. I had no clue that this was happening at the time until I received a phone call from one of his co-workers. He denied everything and I believed him. About 6 months ago he came to me and told me that it was true, he did have an affair that lasted about a year, a year and a half. He said he never loved her and was happy in his marriage. Now, I feel very bitter and wish I could leave but it is financially impossible. Please advice me what to do.*

**Peggy's Response:**

It can be quite a shock to learn of a spouse's affair that happened 6 years ago, 30 years ago—or any "long-ago" affair. So it's important to acknowledge that dealing with this knowledge after such a long time has passed does create some different issues.

Any time you learn about a spouse's affair, it requires going through a process of rewriting the history of your life—but this process can feel even more difficult when it covers such a long period of time and is such old history that must be re-written.

To clarify what I mean by "rewriting your history," dealing with a spouse's affair literally changes your "reality" and calls for trying to integrate this new information into what had been your history.

That's because this is more than just dealing with an affair (as if that's not enough). It's dealing with the fact that your spouse isn't who you thought they were... your marriage isn't what you thought it was... the reality of your world is not what you thought it was.

Unfortunately, since the person who had the affair has known about it for so long, they may feel like it's "old news" and be even less likely to be willing to talk through it and take the time to work through all its ramifications. But they need to understand that regardless of how long ago it *actually* happened, at the moment that someone learns of a spouse's affair—it's *as if* it just happened.

So the spouse has the same need to get answers to their questions and to talk through the whole situation as anyone who learns of their partner's affair at any point. Adding to the difficulty is the fact that the long time-frame may make it more difficult for the one who had the affair to remember all that happened so long ago. Nevertheless, as I've written in the past, it's the willingness to try to answer questions (more than the specific answers) that makes such a difference. So the one who had the affair needs to make their best effort to respond.

Despite the different challenges inherent in this kind of situation, the way to deal with this knowledge many years later is the same way anyone deals with it at ANY point.

Some of the standard efforts that can help involve:

- getting as much understanding and perspective as possible about affairs in general—in order to put this new information into a larger context.
- talking with other trusted friends/relatives in order to avoid feeling so isolated and alone.
- being patient during the long period (perhaps years) that it takes to fully accommodate to this new reality.

Note: The situations described in these questions demonstrate an important point about the whole issue of keeping an affair secret vs. telling.

It's unrealistic to assume that an affair will never be found out, so it's wise to always move toward telling in a caring, timely way. Risking discovery years later is to risk that the spouse will not only have to deal with the affair but also with knowing what a long period of time the secret has been kept, making it even more difficult to recover and rebuild the marriage.

For more on this, see the article under the "Articles about Affairs" section of the website titled "To Tell or Not to Tell."

## Still dealing with the pain after 20 or 30 years?

*Question #1: (Re: affair 22 years ago)*

*My wife had a 3 year long affair with a married man 22 years ago. I moved out and six months later, she ended the affair and came back to me. It was never discussed. The pain is still intense, she has talked about it some, but says I should be over it by now and my efforts to stop it when it was happening weren't strong enough! Even one comment should have been enough. I want to stay together but she says she won't answer any more of my questions. Can you offer any advice?*

*Question #2: (Re: affair 28 years ago)*

*About 1 1/2 years into our marriage, my wife had a brief (2 months) affair with a man she worked with. Although we never went to therapy, we somehow miraculously worked through it and have a great marriage (30 years) and three wonderful children. Occasionally, I have flashbacks of the affair. I have not shared these flashbacks with my wife. Should I or should I just let them go?*

*Question #3: (Re: affair 30 years ago, disclosed 3 years ago)*

*It's been over 3 years since my husband told me of an affair he had 30 years ago. I cannot get over this. We are both in our 70's and it is driving me crazy.*

Peggy's Response:

While many of the specific circumstances in the above questions are quite different, they share a common thread with the fact that the affair happened a long time ago. While time is an essential ingredient in healing, time "alone" (without the other important factors in recovery) really makes no difference—and, in fact, can seem even worse by virtue of being in pain for such a long period of time.

So let me address some of the particular issues raised in the above 3 questions as they relate to recovery.

Re: Question #1...

The affair was "never discussed"—which is the number one reason for a failure to recover on the part of most people. It's almost impossible to overcome the pain when it's buried and not discussed because it's really just "buried alive" and continues to come back over and over. (As for the accusation that "you should be over it by now..." I can confidently say that I have never seen anyone spontaneously "get over it" just based on the passage of time—without also getting their questions answered and talking through the whole situation.)

Also, the pain is likely to be compounded when the person who had the affair resorts to blaming the spouse such as accusing him of "not making a strong enough effort to stop the affair." Frankly, this counterattack is just one of the many techniques people use to try to prevent you from asking questions.

There is no legitimate reason for a spouse to refuse to talk, but there are many reasons they are so resistant to talking.

Here's an excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth* that offers more perspective on this situation:

### *WHEN A PERSON WON'T TALK*

*One of the most frustrating parts of dealing with the fact that a partner has had an affair is the incredible difficulty in getting them to talk about it. This is one of the first issues for most*

*couples following the discovery of an affair—that the spouse who had the affair won't talk. Apparently, they are willing to do almost anything or have almost any consequence rather than discuss their affair.*

*The basic resistance to talking is not as mysterious as we might think. There are five primary reasons people won't talk about their affairs once they've been discovered:*

- a belief in the basic code of silence*
- a desire to maintain their self-image*
- a belief that it's best for their partner not to know*
- a desire to avoid the emotional reactions*
- a desire to continue having affairs.*

(end of excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*)

Note: The book contains much more detail about these 5 reasons (excuses) why people won't talk about their affairs.

Also, there are also a couple of Articles posted on my website that present more good arguments for the importance of talking through this whole situation: "The Need to Know" and "Talking about Affairs."

Also, it might help to bring some "facts" to bear on the request to talk, facts that clearly demonstrate that there is a strong correlation between the degree to which a couple talk through the whole situation and the degree to which they recover and the marriage is rebuilt. For more on the statistical correlation between these points, see my Survey Overview (posted on my website) titled: *Help for Therapists and their Clients*.

Of course, no matter how much time and energy a person puts into the effort to get their partner to talk, it's still quite possible that they won't succeed. At this point, they can at least make it clear to the spouse that if it's never discussed, it will *not* just "go away." It will always be a barrier between you. Then it's up to you to weigh the pros and cons of continuing the marriage.

Re: Question #2...

It would seem that this couple did talk through the affair (and now have a great marriage), but he still has occasional flashbacks of the affair. In order to respond to the question about whether to share this with his wife, I would need a clearer understanding of what is meant by the term "flashbacks."

For instance, if the writer is using the word to refer to "recalling" the facts and feelings from that time 28 years ago, that's quite normal, in fact inevitable. In fact, many people misunderstand "recovery." They think it means getting to the point where you never think about the affair. (But short of a lobotomy, we will always remember the affair.) The real goal is to get to the point where you recall the affair without it evoking the old painful feelings. So just thinking about the affair is normal; but if by "flashback" he means actually feeling the same emotions felt during that difficult time—then this would represent an issue that needs to be addressed.

However, in addressing it, there is still the question of whether it needs to be addressed with the spouse who had the affair or whether it's something the writer needs to work on by himself. If there's something specific still needed from the spouse who had the affair, then it would be appropriate to share this with the spouse. But if (as indicated) the couple worked through what happened and there's nothing else the spouse who had an affair can do at this point to alleviate these "flashbacks," then it's something the writer could try to work on alone. (He could, of course, share the fact that he's having this difficulty AND share the fact that he's trying to deal with it on

his own, knowing there's nothing more she can do. In this way, she could come to know him better, without the expectation that she can "fix" it.)

The work that might best help diminish the flashbacks is this: each time a flashback involuntarily comes to mind, it's time to voluntarily, deliberately remind yourself that this pain was in the past and that today is good because of the work you both did to recover and rebuild. It will take repeated efforts in "correcting" the emotional reaction by replacing it with a rational understanding, but it should gradually lead to less and less emotions whenever any old thoughts/feelings come to mind.

Re: Question #3...

The fact that the affair happened 30 years ago does not mean it's really that far in the past. Dealing with an affair only begins when you learn of it, so for all practical purposes, it's as if it just happened 3 years ago. As mentioned earlier, time alone does not lead to "getting over this." It requires making an effort to get over it, hopefully with both people working together to do this. (It is almost always "crazy-making" when someone tries to deal with it alone.)

So the first effort is to get the spouse who had the affair to discuss it. (See the information above about dealing with the issue of a spouse who won't talk.) If the effort to engage the spouse fails to be productive, then it's important to talk to someone so you are not trying to deal with it alone. This could be a counselor or clergy (or a friend or family member, if they are able to just "be there" for you and not try to impose their own thinking on you).

On my website you can find a list for "Locating a Therapist" in your area who is effective in dealing with affairs. It may also be helpful to read more about affairs in general in my Articles about Affairs, especially the sections on "Personally Recovering" and "Rebuilding the Marriage." I also strongly encourage finding someone to talk to—because this will not just go away on its own—and it's important to be able to talk about it.

P.S. Personally, I'm about the same age of the writer of this question, and I strongly believe that it's still worth putting forth a lot of effort to try to deal with this. The older we get, the more valuable it can be to have a strong connection with our mates. And certainly, that connection is not where it needs to be as long as the feelings about this 30-year-old affair are not dealt with.

## Why would he tell me about an affair 15 years ago?

*Question:*

*Why would my husband (who continued to maintain a friendship with a woman with whom he had had a successfully concealed brief affair 15 years ago), suddenly tell me? I had been totally ignorant of the affair, and am now more angry at the fact that they chose to maintain the deception, and present a facade, than by the fact of the affair itself.*

*Peggy's Response:*

This reaction to being deceived (finding it even worse than the affair itself) is much more common than people realize. In fact, as I've mentioned before, while the sex may be the initial focus, most people recover from the fact that their partner had sex with someone else *before* they recover from the fact that they were deceived.

While it's hard to feel "positive" about anything related to learning something like the above, it's possible that it's a positive sign of the current commitment to the marriage when a spouse "volunteers" this kind of information. (Most people who have had an affair go to great lengths to not only *not* tell—but to deny it if questioned.)

So instead of *only* comparing the fact that the affair was concealed for 15 years with the possibility of it not being concealed at all (or not happening at all)—it might be helpful to put it into the larger perspective of comparing the fact that it was concealed for 15 years to the fact that it might have been concealed *forever*. (Many people, unless caught, *never* reveal an affair.) But it's preferable to be working *toward* a time when you may be able to tell—rather than forever keeping it secret. Then, even if the telling never happens, there will be greater honesty and connection than without this effort.

Of course, the *reason* for telling is critical. If it's done just to unburden or unload or as a means of getting out of the marriage, then that's a completely different story. But when someone voluntarily tell the truth, it *may* be a sign of feeling closer and safer to reveal secrets formerly held; they may not feel as "afraid" of telling as at some earlier point.

This is what happened to me. My husband volunteered the information about all his affairs at a time when our relationship was closer than it had ever been. We were getting along great and were closer than we had been at any previous time in our lives.

Here's an excerpt from my book, *The Monogamy Myth*, that describes my feelings about this:

*Some people wonder if they would have been better off never knowing about the affair. I understand this way of thinking; I still wish it had never happened to me. But since it did happen, I don't wish I'd never found out about it. My strength and vitality as a person comes from knowing what's going on in my world, not from pretending that what I don't know won't hurt me. That attitude only robs a person of the right to lead their life based on the facts instead of on pretense. It's important to believe you're a person worthy of honesty and to insist on a relationship that reflects that worth.*

*Honesty was the motivator for my husband telling me about his affairs. He became uncomfortable with deceiving me and felt I deserved more fairness and equality in the relationship. We also relied on honesty as a way of working through all the feelings that had built up through the years. And honesty was the basis of our commitment to the kind of relationship we wanted to develop in the future.*

(end of excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*)

## 25 Years Ago

### Question:

*I am at my wits end. After years of having accepted my wife's assertion 25 years ago that nothing happened during a very wild night, I now see the facts from that night do not support her story. Rather, it seems she may have indeed had sex that night with two different men. When I asked her about it she said she didn't remember, yet she DID remember several very insignificant details from that night during the time I suspect she was having sex with them. She also remembers very specifically seeing me in the hallway as she left the bedroom with one of the men and went into the living room with the other man.*

*Is it really possible that although she clearly remembers insignificant details, such as who was sitting where on the bed, that she cannot remember whether or not she had sex with one or both of those men that night? I told her it doesn't matter what she did then, but it matters very much that she appears to be hiding behind her "I don't know" and "I don't remember" responses to my direct questions about what actually happened. I just can't live with the denial. Please help.*

### Peggy's Response:

I'm a great believer in honesty and in a willingness to answer questions. Unfortunately, getting "reasonable, consistent, believable" answers is often not possible—because after-the-fact (especially after so many years), it's almost impossible for people to *know* precisely what they said or did—or why they said or did it.

For instance, when my husband tried to remember facts related to his affairs, he didn't even know the answer to a fact related to actual time—like when he began his first affair. He was a whole *year* off. He honestly thought it was a year before it was; all he knew was that it began at a professional conference that took place each year at Labor Day. He also didn't know exactly how many affairs he had; (we never could be sure he remembered or accurately counted them all up). But it was his willingness to try to answer the questions (even when there were no clear answers) that made all the difference.

Sometimes, a person may have shifted things around in their heads so much to make them fit into a reality they can live with, that they really don't have good clarity around a lot of the details. The details simply aren't as important to them as they now are to you—so they may be trying to dredge up clarity when there simply *isn't* any, especially when it comes to feelings. And when someone is this confused about the facts, they often fall back on saying whatever they think might *work* in more nearly being an answer that will satisfy the questions enough to *stop* the questions—which is usually their primary goal.

So a better judge of the significance of any denials of being able to remember more details may be found in the *attitude* behind the denials. Does there seem to be a genuine wish to be able to remember or does it seem to be a handy excuse? While it's understandable to assume this is a deliberate *hiding*, given the above explanation of the process of remembering, it may be that she genuinely can't recall after all this time. So the statement that she "appears to be hiding" behind her responses may or may not be an accurate perception.

## LONG-MARRIEDS DEALING WITH AFFAIR

### What about affairs among long-married couples?

#### Question #1:

*My husband was in his late fifties, as well as the married woman. We had been married 35 years. It has taken us much longer than the 1-2 years to recover, and in fact we still have "bad days" occasionally. Wondering if the feelings of betrayal, loss of trust etc., is different after so many years together. On the other hand those 35 years was a solid base to build on and we celebrate 41 years this year.*

#### Question #2:

*Does length of marriage and age of couple have any bearing on how long it takes to get past the hurt of an affair? We were married 36 years and were in our late 50's when my husband had an affair with a woman that same age from work.*

#### Peggy's Response:

As these two questions illustrate, the issue of affairs is not restricted to only the "young and foolish." As I have often pointed out, affairs touch all kinds of people in all walks of life—and people of *all* ages. While it's true that the chance of affairs (like divorce) diminishes with the length of marriage, there is always the risk/possibility of these things happening.

After so many years of marriage, the initial shock (disbelief) of discovering an affair may be even greater. (After all, you've had more years of thinking you know your spouse, only to discover this side of them that is alien to anything you had considered.) But I have *not* seen evidence that it's necessarily more difficult to recover if you've been married a long time. It's just that the difficulty in recovering is quite significant, regardless of the length of the marriage.

As I have written in the past, none of the specifics of the affair—whether when, for how long, with whom (or how long married)—determine the difficulty in recovering. Recovery depends on what happens after the affair is discovered.

While none of the primary factors in personally recovering and/or rebuilding the marriage relate in any way to the length of the marriage. Nevertheless, there are some difference (both for better and worse) of dealing with an affair in a long-term marriage. (Both of these aspects were clearly articulated in question #1 above.)

On the negative side... those who have been married a long time may feel that the process of adjusting to this "new reality" is a bigger challenge. By "new reality" I mean the adjustment required of anyone discovering a spouse's affair: that "your spouse isn't who you thought they were, your marriage isn't what you thought it was, and your *world* isn't what you thought it was."

On the positive side... long-marrieds have built up a longer history together that provides more joint life experiences/connections that may have developed a stronger bond that can serve to help in dealing with this challenge. So I would encourage long-marrieds to focus on the aspects of each other and their life together that they value (despite the pain) and to use those factors to strengthen their resolve to follow the above guidelines in recovering and rebuilding the marriage.

## "Long-marrieds" dealing with affairs?

(Here are three letters from "long-marrieds" dealing with affairs.)

*Question #1:*

*I am 73 years old and about a year ago my husband admitted that he had an affair at work. At the time the only clue I had was a phone call telling me someone was interested in him and some phone calls he had made to the woman. When I confronted him, he denied everything and said the calls to her were related to work. Now that I know about the affair I am very bitter and devastated and can't seem to get over it. At the time I confronted him, I believed him and let it go.*

*Question #2:*

*After 29 years of marriage, my husband left and is having an affair with a lady from church. She is 7 years his senior. (He is 56, she is 63.) The email between them was like teenagers, he begging her to love him, him defiling me, and her luring him to her. It has been ten months since he left home to live with her. His family says they seem like strangers to one another. What is happening? Will he ever come home?*

*Question #3:*

*My 70 year old retired husband is having an affair with a 37 year old woman. (I am 54; we've been married 35 years and we have 3 grown children.) He left me 16 months ago, but he didn't move to where the other woman lives 360 miles away, just visits her often. We live in a large city; his friends are few and none would chastise him - they'd keep quiet. Our families know; he ignores their comments and shrugs. Her friends/family know (everything) but don't care. She won't let go; I won't either; time's on my side. He says he can't make a choice and I refuse to do it for him, so we all three sit in limbo. We did individual and joint therapy; but he bailed, so I'm in individual therapy. I have read volumes of material, including all of yours, and tried everything I knew. What now? Any different suggestions/ideas?*

**Peggy's Response:**

I have no magic answers for these situations, but felt it was important to highlight the fact that affairs are no respecter of age or length of marriage. I'm afraid that when most people think of "affairs" they have an image of young (or "youngish") people drawn together by lust.

We have the mistaken idea in this culture that sexuality is only for the young. Wrong! As the above letters clearly illustrate, the possibility for getting "carried away" can happen at any age. In fact, as people grow older, some may feel a desperate need to "recapture" their youth, and this may be one of the ways they (erroneously) think they can do it.

Another misconception about affairs is that once you've been married several decades, you've gone beyond the "danger point." We still have the old "seven-year itch" mentality, more recently reduced to the "four-year itch." Anyway, the bottom line is that affairs happen to all kinds of people of all ages and lengths of time being married.

In addition to the age factor involved in these letters, the second one includes a situation where the other woman is not only 7 years older than the husband but is also a "lady from church." This shatters a couple of additional stereotypes—that affairs are with younger women and that "good women" don't have affairs.

Dealing with a spouse's affair is difficult at any age—whether after 2 years of marriage or 42 years of marriage. As these letters illustrate, dealing with this issue is similar for everyone, regardless of age or any other factor.

As for what someone can actually do about it, all the advice/perspective I share in my writing is relevant, regardless of the age or stage of marriage. But I'll comment on some of the specific issues raised above.

*In letter #1:*

He "denied everything"—which is an almost universal response to being questioned. It's also entirely common to feel "very bitter and devastated and can't seem to get over it." The denial adds to the bitterness, and "getting over it" is a long process, almost always taking a couple of years.

*In letter #2:*

Re: the question "What is happening?"...this confusion is often based on feeling that the behavior doesn't make sense—and it doesn't make any rational sense, so it's useless to try to make it make sense. As for the question "Will he ever come home?"...there's no way to know for sure. Since it's been "10 month" and the normal course of affairs runs from 6 months to 2 years, the uncertainty may continue for another year before it becomes clear.

*In letter #3:*

Since she has "tried everything I knew", it's clear that she doesn't have the power to control (of perhaps even influence) her husband's behavior. So it may be time to simply focus on herself. So I'll share some ideas for "Taking Care of Yourself" that I've shared before. (These are excerpted from an excellent book titled *The Passion Trap* by Dean C. Delis.

1. Be good to yourself.
2. *Get a grip on reality. An emotional crisis clouds your perceptions-and when you're not thinking straight, it's hard to act in your best interests. You tend to catastrophize, self-sabotage, and exaggerate the other's behaviors.*
3. *Have brave new thoughts. Think of how you can change, don't be afraid to think of creative ways to save a relationship.*
4. *Create healthy distance. Keep busy, don't neglect other areas of life, build new strengths, do things on your own that have nothing to do with the other person.*
5. *Explain what you're doing. Don't try to "pretend" to your partner. Let them know what you're doing.*
6. *Face your fears of distance. Write down your biggest fear of distance, reframe your fear in nonaccusatory terms, and tell your partner how you're now re-thinking these fears.*
7. *Define your limits. This is not an ultimatum, but a way of bringing a resolution instead of continuing indefinitely in the one-up, one-down situation.*

## Hope for an old married couple?

*Question:*

*We were married for 30 years when he had the affair one year ago. I feel he only came back to me because he was aware of what he would lose and therefore I feel second best. I also have lost my self-respect because I took him back under those circumstances. I also have a hard time responding sexually. All the "experts" including yourself promise our marriage will be better after working through this but I feel it's hopeless sometimes. Any words of wisdom for an old married couple?*

Peggy's Response:

Frankly, none of us "experts" can promise anything. All we can do is provide perspective based on hearing what usually happens or what usually works. Obviously, there are no guarantees regarding anything related to this complex issue.

Having said that, I do want to reiterate what I have said—which is that it's possible to rebuild a stronger marriage. In fact, I wrote about this in a previous Question, so I'm going to share some of that perspective again for those who have difficulty believing it's possible.

But first, I want to comment on some of the statements in the above letter.

For instance: "I feel he only came back to me because he was aware of what he would lose and therefore I feel second best." A closer look at this statement reveals that he clearly preferred "losing" whatever he was getting from the affair as compared to "losing" what he was getting from the marriage. That sounds a little like being first, not second best. The truth is that marriage is a package of many things—all valuable. And while other aspects of the marriage may be valued, this certainly includes valuing the specific partner in the marriage.

Also, it's perfectly legitimate to "take him back" under any circumstances you choose. As a reminder of what some of those legitimate reasons are for taking him back, see the article under the "Articles about Affairs" section of the website titled "Why Stay with a Spouse who has Had an Affair."

As for the issue of "having a hard time responding sexually," this can happen, especially during the first couple of years when the pain of the situation is strongest. (The above letter indicates it's been one year.) But it's important to adopt an attitude of willingness to try to gradually shift toward more sexual responsiveness. This can be facilitated by simply not "holding back" anytime there's the slightest warm or loving feelings. For more on this process, see the article under the "Articles about Affairs" section of the website titled "Recovering those loving feelings."

## TALKING AND GETTING ANSWERS

### Refusing to talk about the affair?

#### Question #1:

*I am still struggling with the "secrecy" of my husband's affair with my neighbor. He said that the issue is closed as far as he is concerned. When I try to talk with him about the importance of our resolving the "why" it occurred he said it was just stupid. This is the 2nd time that I know that he has had an affair in the last ten years of our 37 year marriage. How can I come to grips with this issue when he refuses to talk?*

#### Question #2:

*My husband refuses to discuss the affair he had any more. He feels we should just move on. For the most part we have. WE are better than we have ever been. Except that it still drives me crazy that he wont talk to me about any more. His refusal to answer any more questions is the only thing holding me back from completely moving on. Should I try harder to just accept it his way or demand for him to see it my way?*

#### Question #3:

*My partner has had an affair with a co-worker he still works with her. I have not been given all the answers to my questions and still feel as if my partner is deceiving me, whenever I do question him he palms it off, gets defensive or treats me like I'm being foolish. I'm trying to work through but continually feel like I'm hitting a brick wall.*

#### Question #4:

*I am having a difficult time having my wife answer any questions about her affair in or out of therapy. Is it possible that you could compile a list of the most common questions asked. This would get her to know that these are universal need to know questions from most effected, and also help me get my thoughts together to make the process shorter.*

#### Question #5:

*How do you get over it and stop asking your spouse questions or throwing a fit as my spouse likes to call it. My spouse refuses to talk about the issue-just wants to move on. It's hard to move on when I found out again - when I thought we were moving on... How do you forget & forgive??*

#### Question #6:

*How can I get my husband to talk about his affair. He says I don't need to know. In fact I cannot get him to open up at all, he just clams up when I talk about anything to do with the breakdown of our marriage, how he feels, how I feel. I cannot get through to him. I ask a question and can wait and wait for a reply and often forget the question eventually!*

#### Question #7:

*How can I get my husband to understand why I need him to talk with me about his affair?*

Peggy's Response:

As I have pointed out in the past, this is the *number one* issue for most people after finding out about their spouse's affair. I've written so much about this in the past that there's very little new to add. But I'll try to address it again because it's such an important issue.

There is no way to guarantee that someone will finally talk, but it's important *not* to give up and just accept it—because that's exactly why they are refusing to talk: hoping you'll eventually give up. That doesn't mean to constantly "nag" or bring it up; it just means making it clear that this issue will never go away until it's dealt with. Otherwise, after some period where things may be relatively quiet, they start hoping/believing that you won't bring it up again. Then when you inevitably do (because it doesn't stay buried even if you try; it's "buried alive" and just keeps coming back from now on)...they express dismay and say something like, "I thought you were doing so well." So that's why it's important (even when you're doing relatively well) to make it clear that this is only a temporary lull but it will *not* "go away" without being dealt with.

Having said this (about not giving up), it's also critical—and your responsibility—to do your part in supporting any efforts at honesty. For instance, while I encourage the spouse who had an affair to carefully read the entire article posted on the website titled "The Need to Know," (which explains a lot about why it's important to answer questions and talk)—you specifically need to read (and apply) the ideas in the section of that posting about "The Importance of Reinforcing the Honesty."

Frankly, nobody is going to continue to answer questions if every answer is greeted by an immediate retaliation. (While you may feel "justified" in a strong reaction, it's simply not "smart" to do that because it means you're essentially sabotaging your own desire to get answers.) One thing that helps you deal with the negative feelings is to constantly remind yourself that the positive aspect of "getting answers" is more important than the negative aspect of the answers themselves.

For those who are still unconvinced of the fact that the preferred path to recovery and rebuilding is in answering questions and talking through the whole situation, I encourage you again to read some of the results of my Survey on Affairs. (You can find a link to it near the bottom of the home page titled "Survey Report.") The section with results of the Statistical Analyses clearly shows that getting answers to questions and thoroughly discussing the details of the affair increases the likelihood of maintaining and rebuilding the marriage. (Other results clearly show the same kind of increase in the likelihood of recovering from a spouse's affair.) These survey results are consistent with what I have been told repeatedly through the years: "nothing is worse than not knowing."

## Not talking about the affair?

Question #1:

*My husband's affair is a taboo subject. We still take care of his discomfort first. At what point does he have the right to "roll his eyes" at the mentioning, or even the hint of his affair?*

Question #2:

*I have been struggling with getting over an emotional affair that my husband had that involved a few kisses. My husband wants to put it behind, as do I, but inside, I am still upset about the whole thing. It was like pulling teeth to get details from him, with a closing comment from my husband that said, "get over it, you will never know everything." The flare-ups that come in the relationship regarding the affair are fewer, but I still think about it daily. Can I get him to talk? How?*

Peggy's Response:

Sad, but true, that the person who has an affair often tries to avoid dealing with the impact of their behavior. So they try to get you to stop asking questions by any method possible (like "rolling the eyes" or reacting with "flare-ups"). In fact, this stance is part of a larger pattern of thinking that I've previously written about. That is that people who have affairs usually live by a certain mindset: "Never tell. If questioned, deny it. If caught, say as little as possible."

So their reaction to any efforts to get them to talk about it is to act as if you just want to punish them by talking. They can't seem to understand that you simply Need to Know in order to have any chance of recovering and rebuilding the marriage—and that it's perfectly reasonable for you to want to talk about the affair. For more detail on these points, see the articles on the website listed as: "The Need to Know" and "Talking about Affairs."

Frankly, there are some "natural consequences" as a result of an affair, but they want to avoid facing these consequences of their behavior. So their desire to avoid talking is part of this unreasonable desire to avoid the inevitable fallout from their actions.

As for how to get them to talk...no one can force a spouse to talk. But at least you can have the peace of mind of knowing that your expectations and requests are reasonable—and determine not to be thrown off by the obvious efforts to "shut you up" by whatever means necessary.

This doesn't mean that you resign yourself to never knowing. You try everything possible, and then finally decide for yourself whether you have received enough information to be able to go on.

Below is an excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth* that addresses this issue:

### *WHEN A PERSON WON'T TALK*

*One of the most frustrating parts of dealing with the fact that a partner has had an affair is the incredible difficulty in getting them to talk about it. This is one of the first issues for most couples following the discovery of an affair—that the spouse who had the affair won't talk. Apparently, they are willing to do almost anything or have almost any consequence rather than discuss their affair.*

*Sometimes it's very predictable that a person won't talk. For instance, one man who felt sure his wife was having an affair and felt they could work through it and stay together, simply couldn't get his wife to discuss it. He felt this was due to the fact that he'd told her when they were married that he'd divorce her immediately if she ever had an affair. And no matter what*

*he said now, he was unable to reassure her that he no longer felt as he had when he issued that threat. Since there may be no way to escape the effects of such statements once they're made, it's important to avoid making these kinds of threats; they inevitably reinforce the general reluctance to talking.*

*The basic resistance to talking is not as mysterious as we might think. There are five primary reasons people won't talk about their affairs once they've been discovered:*

- 1. Belief in the Basic Code of Silence*
- 2. Feelings of Guilt and Shame*
- 3. Protecting Their Partner's Feelings*
- 4. Avoiding a Showdown*
- 5. A Desire to Continue Having Affairs*

#### **NO EASY ANSWERS**

*"No matter how much time and energy a person puts into the effort to get their partner to talk, it's still quite possible that they won't succeed. If they simply can not get the answers they want about their partner's affair, they need to find a way to accept this situation. It usually takes a long time to reach this point, since most people continue trying to get their spouse to talk long after it's clear that their efforts are in vain. One woman who had tried for almost two years to get her husband to discuss his affairs finally accepted the fact that he was never going to talk about why it happened. It was easier for her to accept this situation once she realized that there may be no clear reason, that even the person having an affair may not know exactly why it happened.*

*There are no easy answers about anything related to the issue of affairs. That's why it's so important to learn as much as possible about all aspects of this issue and avoid any quick or simplistic solutions. It's understandable that a person wants to overcome the initial pain of learning of their partner's affair as quickly as possible, but sometimes the most effective way of doing that is to accept an unavoidable period of adjustment. While it's extremely difficult to cope with the strong emotions during this period, a conscious effort to hang in and deal with each aspect of the situation may allow for a more satisfying resolution in the long run.*

(end of excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*)

Note that the book contains much more detail about the above listed 5 primary reasons people won't talk.

## Can I move on without knowing details?

*Question:*

*I found out about my husband's affairs 4 months ago after someone told me of his latest one. We are in counseling and wish to work things out, but I am haunted by questions of the details of the previous affairs. My counselor says the details are not going to help me and to focus on going forward. Is this really being completely honest enough for me to move on? I am so untrusting now and feel haunted by all of my unanswered questions like who they were, how many, when and where?*

*Peggy's Response:*

When/whether any person is ready to "move on" can only be determined by the individual person. For most people, that time does not come unless/until you feel confident that your spouse is willing to be completely honest. It's not that knowing all the details per se is what helps someone to move on; it's being confident that they can know any detail they want to know any time they want to know it. (As I have said many times, no one should have to learn any details they don't want to know. But they not only need, but deserve, to be told any detail they *do* want to know.)

So despite the counselor saying that "the details are not going to help," the more critical reality is that *not* getting answers to your questions about details will "hurt"—making it far less likely that you can recover and rebuild the relationship. Unfortunately, many otherwise excellent counselors do not understand the importance of this point.

In fact, thanks to the urging of the well-known researcher, John Gottman, I undertook a study to try to get statistical evidence to support the importance of answering questions. He pointed out to me that he was convinced I was correct about this, but that many therapists would require some kind of "evidence" in order to believe it.

So I undertook a survey of 1,083 people whose spouses had had affairs, and the statistical analyses showed a very strong correlation between the degree to which all questions were answered and thoroughly discussed with the degree to which there was both personal recovery and rebuilding the marriage.

The results of the survey are contained in a 119-page report which I titled "Help for Therapists and their Clients in dealing with affairs." If any counselor/therapist is interested in a complimentary copy of the full report, please go to the "Therapists" section on the website and read "Therapists' Message" listed on the Blue Bar. This page contains an Invitation to Therapists and Counselors where I invite you to first read the Overview of this report. Then if this resonates with you as a counselor, I ask that you send me your name to be listed on my list for "Locating a Therapist," and I will send you a complimentary copy of the full report (emailed in pdf format).

I have written more on the need to get questions answered than on any other topic, primarily because this is the #1 issue for most people trying to deal with their partner's affair. In fact, most people say that nothing is worse than "not knowing." As long as their partner withholds information they want to know, it's very difficult to ever trust again—because there is still a lack of honesty in the relationship.

Unfortunately, many people define honesty as "not lying." However, honesty is much more than just "not lying;" it's "not withholding relevant information." So deliberately withholding information so desperately wanted by your spouse is correctly interpreted as a lack of honesty. For a clearer understanding of all this, see the article posted on the website titled: Honesty!"

Other articles on the website that I recommend include "The Need to Know" and "Is it reasonable to want to talk about the affair?"

## How can she lie like this?

*Question:*

*My wife had an affair that she said is over. I believe the only reason it is over was is the fact that I found them. The lies started immediately. Lied to me, our 4 children, our family members during and still after the affair. She abandoned our children more than once to be with him. She says it wasn't her, it didn't seem like an affair, because they were only having oral sex, and she didn't think I would mind. How can a person make such terrible distinctions?*

Peggy's Response:

This is a classic case of a person trying to absolve themselves from responsibility by rationalizing everything about their affair.

Re: *"It wasn't her."*

Of course, even if it was unlike her *normal* behavior, it WAS "her." People need to accept responsibility for *all* aspects of themselves, not just the ones they're proud of.

Re: *"It didn't seem like an affair, because they were only having oral sex."*

Another rationalization. Actually, it's not up to the person having an affair to be the judge of this; the determination of whether or not it's an affair is best made by the *spouse* who is being hurt, not be the person involved in another relationship.

Re: *"She didn't think I would mind."*

If someone truly thinks their partner wouldn't mind, they would have told them about the other relationship. This is another very obvious attempt to shift the blame for the situation to someone else instead of accepting it personally.

Re: *"How can a person make such terrible distinctions?"*

These kinds of efforts to "split hairs" illustrate an effort to dictate and control everything and everybody (using any means possible to justify/defend/rationalize the behavior)—while accepting no personal responsibility. None of these ways of "thinking" are rational. They're the normal irrational efforts people use to protect themselves from the consequences of their actions. It also serves to "protect" them from feeling bad about themselves—or even acknowledging that there's anything to feel bad about in the first place.

Bottom line:

The best way to understand these "lies" is to understand that people are usually *first* lying to *themselves*. Only when they begin being honest with themselves can they be more honest with others.

## Why do they lie?

*Question:*

*Why do they continue to lie when caught?*

Peggy's Response:

As I've said over and over (and one of the key points in my book, *The Monogamy Myth*), the absolute norm is: "Never tell. If questioned, deny it. If caught, say as little as possible."

This is almost universal. So even if/when someone is caught, they tell only what they absolutely have to tell—no more. This is totally understandable in that nobody (on any issue) wants to voluntarily disclose things that they know will create bad reactions; it's normal human survival.

(Of course, there are also *other* reasons for not "telling it all"—feelings of guilt or shame, protecting their partner's feelings, avoiding a showdown, and/or a desire to continue having affairs. But by far the most basic reason is simply a belief in the basic code of silence I quoted above.

The fact is that very few people who learn of their partner's affairs ever learn everything. They're often afraid they don't know everything, but they're even more afraid of finding out there's more (and frankly, they often can't really imagine there's more—because they're still trying to think rationally and make this "make sense.")

As I've said before, nothing about affairs makes sense in a rational, clear-thinking way. It's an emotion-based experience, full of denial and rationalization. So any efforts to really understand why people having affairs do what they do is somewhat illusive in that they often don't know the full "truth" themselves.

## Why won't he stop lying?

*Question:*

*My husband just doesn't seem to be able to tell the truth. We are getting along much better, but I have that nagging feeling that he's still lying. Sometimes it's not even about anything really important; it's almost as if he just finds it easier to tell a lie than tell the truth. Why would he do that when he says he doesn't want to lie anymore?*

*Peggy's Response:*

When a person has adopted "lying" as a way of life (which often happens when someone is having an affair), there's always the question of when/whether they are no longer lying. As with any major change in an engrained behavior, it's often hard to quit "cold turkey"—even when there's a genuine desire to do so. Part of the reason for this is that a person who has lied to others has usually first lied to themselves. They have rationalized their behavior and told themselves whatever was required in order to deal with the gap between who they were and who they pretended to be.

So it may be that stopping lying involves a process of becoming comfortable with this new, unfamiliar way of being "honest." (Honesty, by the way is more than just "not lying;" it's "not withholding relevant information." This true "honesty," of course, can't be achieved without first overcoming the tendency to lie.)

When a person is having affairs, it usually feels "safer" to lie than to tell the truth; but once they commit to rebuilding the trust that has been broken, they need to see that it's now both safer and smarter to tell the truth. So while it may seem unfair for the person who has been hurt by the earlier lies to be supportive of their partner's efforts to tell the truth (especially when the truth hurts), if they are ever to overcome the tendency to lie, it's critical to avoid "punishing" them when they do tell the truth. (Since most of us do or say whatever "works," if they feel it's not working to tell the truth, they won't be motivated to continue trying to break the habit of lying.)

The bottom line is that all habits can be changed when there's a genuine desire to do so and when there's support from others during that process.

## Why did he lie about details?

*Question:*

*I discovered my husband's 2-year affair over 3 years ago. We did counseling and talked frequently. When confronted with new info, he would admit it, but was never forthright with information about his affair. Here we are three years later, and he is finally correcting some false information he had given me regarding his affair (like places they had sex). For me the worst was finding out about his affair, why lie about 'where' only to be truthful 3 years later. Is this normal?*

Peggy's Response:

Unfortunately, it's quite common for the whole truth not to be told in the beginning. (In fact, it's very rare for someone to be honest about every detail when initially responding to questions.) It seems that the whole idea of telling details is so scary that they hide or hold back or substitute information based on what they think sounds like the best answer at the time. As I have written in the past, eventually learning more of the truth is like slowly peeling the layers of an onion.

While it can be extremely confusing and frustrating when they later correct the false information, a part of this later admission of the truth can be a positive sign—in that it usually means they now feel more connected and feel it's "safer" to now tell the truth than in the early days when things were overall more emotional and stressful.

Basically, people tell themselves whatever they need to in order to convince themselves that it's better to lie, including:

- to avoid a showdown or an emotional reaction
- a general belief that it's better not to "rock the boat"
- to avoid making themselves "look bad"
- to avoid facing the consequences of their actions
- to avoid accepting responsibility for their behavior
- to "protect" the feelings of others if they knew the truth

Another reason for lying about some details in the beginning is that when a person has adopted lying as a way of life (which often happens when someone is having an affair), it's often hard to quit "cold turkey" when the affair is discovered. Part of the reason for this is that a person who has lied to others has usually first lied to themselves. They have rationalized their behavior and told themselves whatever was required in order to deal with the gap between who they were and who they pretended to be. Only when they begin being honest with themselves can they be more honest with others.

It's helpful if there can be a new understanding of the benefits of honesty—not just focusing on the risks. For instance, being honest can bring a sense of relief and renewed energy for life because it takes a lot of energy to do all the rationalizing necessary to tell lies and still feel OK about yourself. So this kind of "personal benefit" may be another good argument for dropping the habit of lying. And basically, this seems to be the biggest reason for continued lying—that it has become a very, very ingrained *habit*, a way of life. And changing something so basic is very, very difficult.

Finally, there needs to be an understanding (by both people) that *not lying* is the top priority of the relationship. That the *positive* impact of honesty is more important than the *negative* impact of whatever truth is being lied about. That means that even when negative information is shared, the willingness to share it is more positive than the facts of whatever is shared are negative. This is not easy, but is possible if both people understand this and commit to it.

## What if you never tell?

*Question:*

*All the research I have seen shows statistics for affairs that have been confessed. How many happy marriages do you think there are where a spouse has strayed, repented and never told?*

Peggy's Response:

The above question asks about "happy marriages" as if there is a clear way to determine this. Whether or not someone feels their marriage is "happy" is more a matter of their individual perception than any actual reality.

For instance, the two people involved in the same marriage may have different opinions of whether or not their marriage is happy. Perhaps someone who has had an affair that has not been revealed feels they have a happy marriage because they realize how they risked losing it and now appreciate it more. But the spouse may have suspicions and ongoing underlying uncertainty as to whether an affair might have taken place, preventing them from feeling they have a happy marriage. (Note that just because a spouse doesn't ask about an affair doesn't mean they don't suspect and/or wonder. More about this later...)

Also, of course, being "happy" is not a black-and-white issue; happiness falls along a continuum of degrees of happiness. It also varies at different times throughout a normal marriage, due to the inevitable issues a couple face over a period of many years.

Not only may the two people in a given marriage make different assessments of the degree of happiness in the marriage at any particular point, but two people in two different marriages might have similar overall situations, but one may judge their marriage to be happy while the other does not. Since, as stated earlier, happiness is "in the eye of the beholder," it's clear that there is no way to accurately judge in any absolute sense whether any given marriage is "happy."

Now... to address the specific issue of the potential impact on a marriage "where a spouse has strayed, repented and never told."

Many people assume that if an affair is never disclosed and never discovered, then no harm is done to the marriage. The biggest problem with this way of thinking is the basic assumption that the spouse doesn't "know" about the affair. Many (most?) spouses do suspect and intuitively "know"—without "knowing for sure. This kind of "knowing" but "not knowing" creates an enormous amount of anxiety and uncertainty and is often quite crazy-making.

It's false to assume that just because there's never been a confrontation or an acknowledgement of the suspicion that it doesn't exist. Many people who suspect a spouse's affair try very hard to deny their suspicions for a very long time, hoping they're wrong. But the suspicions don't just "go away." And the day may come when they finally feel strong enough to confront it. (I can personally vouch for this, because I spent seven years in this kind of suspicion/denial before ever acknowledging it. And all during this time, my husband assumed I didn't "know.")

Whether or not there is ever a confrontation... the secrecy itself does create ongoing harm. That's because keeping a significant secret like this creates an emotional distance (to protect the secret) that makes the marriage vulnerable to all kinds of other problems, having nothing to do with affairs.

In my book, *The Monogamy Myth*, I wrote:

*While some relationships come apart from not being ready to deal with the truth, many more relationships come apart because of the effort to keep an affair hidden.*

Most people who have had an affair live by the mantra of "never tell." While I would not recommend "just telling" without proper preparation, I dispute the idea that you should *never* tell. I recommend "working toward telling" (whether or not you ever get there), because the simple process of continuously increasing the level of honesty is a positive thing for the marriage.

Frankly, it's unrealistic to assume that an affair will never be found out, so it's wise to always move toward telling in a caring, timely way. Risking discovery years later is to risk that the spouse will not only have to deal with the affair but also with knowing what a long period of time the secret has been kept, making it even more difficult to recover and rebuild the marriage.

In the meantime, it's important to take the time to lay the groundwork for telling by first establishing a commitment to honesty and to the idea that the purpose of telling is specifically to eliminate all secrets and grow closer as a couple. So the bottom line is to gradually moving toward telling—and to "Never say never!"

## Can I risk telling her the truth?

*Question:*

*My wife and I have been separated for 6 months. We have had a very tough 5yr marriage and nearly filed for divorce, but we have begun counseling and are attending a Retrouvaille weekend. I have cheated 4 times (1 during the separation). I want to tell her the truth but I fear it would be the final straw. Can I wait until our communication skills are better to reveal the truth? I want to save our marriage.*

Peggy's Response:

This issue of "telling" is one of the most complex issues to be determined. Of course, there's risk in "telling"—but there's *also* risk in "not telling."

While this kind of honesty can be harmful if it's practiced with no regard for its impact on the other person, there's much more involved than simply deciding whether to be honest. It's important to focus on when, why, and how—paying attention to timing, motivation, and caring. (The above letter illustrates an awareness of the need to develop good communication skills in order to improve the likelihood of "telling" in such a way that can lead to strengthening the marriage, not destroying it.)

Many people assume that if an affair is never disclosed and never discovered, then no harm is done to the marriage. But "never telling" creates a serious break in the connection by virtue of the emotional distance necessary to maintain a secret of this magnitude. It creates a vulnerability to all kinds of issues developing that could eventually diminish or destroy the marriage, even if an affair is never discovered. (The description above is a clear illustration of the kind of significant harm that can come to a relationship—*without* having told about the affairs.)

This does *not* mean that it's a good idea to "tell" immediately. In fact, telling is not a black-or-white issue. It's more reasonable to think in terms of always working "toward" telling by developing more and more honesty in the marriage. Whether or not it reaches the point of telling about the affair, at least the marriage will be better by virtue of the honesty. Mainly, it's important *not* to assume that telling is not possible. In other words, never say "never."

## Is it possible to recover without answers?

*Question:*

*I discovered my husband's 2+ years affair less than 2 months ago. While recovering from that through counseling and many discussions, I discovered a month later yet another infidelity with someone from his past. This was a one nighter. Every discovery and detail disclosed by him is at my prompting with questions. I feel if I don't ask the right questions, I won't get the whole truth. Is it possible for me to recover without his being forthright on his own about everything?*

Peggy's Response:

The issues raised in the above letter are among the most common:

1. lack of initial full disclosure—often learning more later
2. difficulty of getting answers to questions about the affair(s)
3. what is needed for recovery

So I'll address some of the factors involved in each issue:

1. lack of initial full disclosure—often learning more later

Frankly, it's highly unusual for someone to provide "the whole truth" upon discovery. Getting information is somewhat like "peeling an onion"—removing one thin layer at a time. Typically they acknowledge only whatever has been discovered—or whatever they think might be discovered. (The basic attitude is: "Never tell. If questioned, deny it. If caught, say as little as possible.")

2. difficulty of getting answers to questions about the affair(s)

There's usually a great effort to avoid answering questions. I devoted a large section of "The Monogamy Myth" to explaining the many reasons (rationalizations) as to why people resist answering questions, including: belief in the basic code of silence, feelings of guilt and shame, protecting their partner's feelings, avoiding a showdown, and a desire to continue having affairs. However, most people sense when they don't know the whole truth—and "not knowing" is the worst of all. Also, when (as often happens) more information is discovered later, it's like starting the whole recovery process all over again.

3. what is needed for recovery

The question of what's involved in recovery is complex—in that there are two different types of recovery: there's personal recovery from the experience (regardless of whether or not the marriage survives) and there's recovering/rebuilding the marriage. However, *both* are impacted by the degree to which questions are answered and the issue is fully discussed.

## When should I stop asking questions?

### Question #1:

*Is there a guideline for "when" I should stop the questions and get on with recovery? We are 3 1/2 months into a great recovery after my husband revealed 8 infidelities to me, including that he was leaving me for the most recent OW. He thinks that by now I should know all that I need to know. He has tried to answer my questions, but often can't remember the details I ask for, even about the most recent affair. His counselor said that it could keep him from having closure.*

### Question #2:

*You mentioned that the healing process involves finding out a great deal about affairs. If the hurt spouse doesn't search out for information regarding affairs, does this prolong the healing and/or making the healing impossible to happen?*

### Peggy's Response:

I continue to receive a lot of questions about the issue of getting answers to your questions as well as the whole issue of whether it's necessary to seek information (as reflected in question #2 above).

*To briefly address the second question first...*

It makes it much more difficult to heal if someone does not get (or even seek) information regarding affairs. However "getting information" refers to the need to gain more "understanding and perspective" in general about the whole issue—which is different from "getting answers" from the spouse. (In other words, personal recovery is affected by getting information about the issue of affairs in general, and marital recovery is affected by getting answers from the spouse.)

As I have addressed in the past, personal recovery (healing) is separate from marital recovery. For a more thorough explanation of this, see the article under the "Articles about Affairs" section of the website titled "Keys to Personal Recovery."

*Regarding question #1 above as to "when I should stop the questions and get on with recovery"...*

Asking questions IS part of the process of getting on with the recovery. Recovery doesn't happen in a vacuum; it's the result of taking actions over time that aid the recovery, and getting answers to questions is one of those actions. (Frankly, most people continue to want to ask questions for a couple of years; it's highly unlikely that all questions would be resolved in 3-1/2 months.)

Of course, no one "should" ask any questions they don't WANT to ask—or ask questions for any longer than they want to ask them. But if someone still feels the need to ask questions (even though they may have been answered many times), then the spouse who had the affair needs to be willing to continue to try to respond. It's this willingness that's so important, even more than the specific questions or answers. It demonstrates his accepting responsibility for doing whatever is needed (for as long as it's needed) to help the recovery.

It's unfortunate that a counselor would advise that "it could keep him from having closure." (Joint counseling might provide a different perspective from individual counseling.) Frankly, *his* closure is not the issue; closure happens when *you* feel ready for closure.

For information about the statistical significance of getting answers to questions, see the material included in the article listed on the home page titled "Survey Report."

## How much should we discuss her affair?

*Question:*

*How much time should we spend talking about my wife's affair and our problems leading up to it? It is 4 months since she confessed and it is constantly on my mind but I am afraid to bring it up sometimes as I also want to try and have good times—should it be once a week, once a month? should we set a regular date to discuss it? How do I avoid spoiling a lovely day because something triggers a reaction in me?*

Peggy's Response:

I wish there were a timing "formula" that worked for everyone, but there's not. However, to reflect more precisely on the alternative schedules mentioned in the above letter, "once a month" is nowhere near enough talking to effectively deal with this. And 4 months since learning of the affair is an extremely short time; it usually requires a lot of talking for about two years before the "triggers" cease to interfere with life.

What works best is for there to be some kind of consensus agreement between the two people as to when to discuss the affair. Almost certainly, any such agreement will call for *more* discussion than is desired by the one who had an affair—and *less* discussion than is felt to be needed by the spouse who is struggling to deal with the affair. In arriving at something that "works," it's important to respect the fact that there *does* need to be a *lot* of discussion. This whole issue does not just "go away" in the process of pursuing "good times." The good times are superficial unless the underlying connection is restored by virtue of working through the issues related to the affair.

Not discussing it does not mean avoiding "spoiling a lovely day;" it just means only spoiling the day for the one who is privately struggling with some "trigger" instead of "spoiling" it for *both* people. In all fairness, why would the one who had an affair be protected from having their day being spoiled—at the expense of their partner dealing alone with whatever is privately "spoiling" their enjoyment of the day.

So while it's understandable (and desirable) they have some positive times together during the process of working through this whole situation, it's short-sighted to sacrifice long-term recovery for short-term relief from talking. This is a *joint* problem, and both people need to participate jointly in doing enough talking on an ongoing basis that they eventually get to the point of being able to enjoy *many* "lovely days" where the "triggers" no longer interfere for anyone.

## How can I get answers to my questions?

*Question:*

*My spouse avoids answering my questions about his numerous affairs. His response is always the same; he says he doesn't remember. He says the affairs were not important to him, so he didn't retain any details about them. I am at my wits end. How can I get him to answer my questions? His last affair was 3 years ago.*

**Peggy's Response:**

Most of the time when you can't get answers to your questions, your partner is hoping that at some point you'll give up and that this will just "go away" and no longer be an issue. It sometimes helps a little to simply make it clear that it will *always* be an issue—whether or not it is "dropped" as a topic of conversation. While obviously, no one can "make" their spouse talk, they *can* make it clear that this will always remain as a barrier between them.

Even when people are "eventually" honest about everything, they usually "tell it all" in stages. (I've referred to this pattern as being like peeling layers of an onion.) I'm a great believer in honesty and in a willingness to answer questions. Unfortunately, getting "reasonable, consistent, believable" answers is often not possible—because "after-the-fact" like this, it's almost impossible for them to "know" what they were thinking—or even precisely what they said or did—or why they said or did it.

For instance, when I say they may not "know," James demonstrated that he didn't know the answer to a fact related to actual time—like when he began his first affairs. He was a whole *year* off. He honestly thought it was a year before it was; all he knew was that it began at a professional conference that took place each year at Labor Day. And he didn't know exactly how many affairs he had; we never could be sure he remembered or accurately counted them all up.) But it was his "willingness to try" to answer the questions—even when there were no clear answers—that made all the difference.

Sometimes, a person may have shifted things around in their heads so much to make them "fit" into a reality they can live with, that they really don't have good clarity around a lot of the details. The details simply aren't as important to them as they now are to you—so they may be trying to dredge up clarity when there never *was* any, especially when it comes to feelings. And when someone is this confused about the facts, they often fall back on saying whatever they think might "work" in more nearly being an answer that will satisfy the questions enough to *stop* the questions—which is usually their primary goal.

## How can I elicit empathy instead of anger?

*Question:*

*What is a good way to approach sensitive issues without offending the other person, but helping them hear you and have empathy instead of anger?*

Peggy's Response:

This question was actually much longer and was about a general relationship issue, not specifically dealing with affairs. I think we can learn a lot by noticing how we generally approach a sensitive issue (and what reaction it elicits)—because the pattern of communication in those instances is likely to be repeated in a much more intense way in trying to talk about affairs.

So this is an area where anyone can benefit in learning some ways to be more effective in raising sensitive issues. And it's an important thing to learn—because there are so many sensitive topics that we want to be able to discuss and "to be heard." Unfortunately, all too often we approach an issue in a manner that winds up only creating defensiveness on the part of the other person. And rather than making things better, it can actually make things worse.

Some major work in improving male-female communication (especially in dealing with conflict) has been done by John Gottman, the well-known researcher, at his "Love Labs" in Seattle, Washington. One key point he stresses for improving communication is to avoid what he terms a "harsh start-up" (the abrupt and negative introduction of an issue). He says this kind of initiation of a conversation is strongly associated with a bad outcome.

His observation was specifically aimed at women, saying that when women begin with a "critical start-up," men tend to become physiologically "flooded," closing down emotionally and physically. However, this advice could be helpful to either gender who is bringing up a sensitive issue.

Of course, when strong emotions are involved, it's difficult to be "soft" in your start-up of the conversation, but clearly you have a better chance of being heard if you do so. Since that's the whole point of the discussion, it's in your own self-interest to speak in such a way as to make it more likely that you will get what you want—which is a productive discussion about the particular "sensitive issue."

So clearly, the smart thing to do is to do whatever you can to support the possibility that your partner will hear you. As I have written in the past, when someone feels "attacked," they are simply not capable of having compassion for you. Rather than focusing on you and your pain, they are likely to focus on themselves and on the fact that they are being attacked.

Maybe you think it's "unfair" to need to be careful in the way you talk, but it's simply "smart"—if you want to be heard. And since the whole point is to have them focus on what you're saying and how you're feeling about whatever issue you raise, there's no point in sabotaging your efforts from the very beginning.

Of course, no matter how carefully you try to present your feelings, there is no guarantee that you will get the response you want. This is particularly true when it comes to dealing with the "sensitive" subject of a partner's affair. In those instances, their anger may have nothing to do with the way you approach the subject. It may simply be a reaction aimed at simply trying to "shut you up" by whatever means necessary, hoping you'll quit trying to talk about it.

However, even when the topic is affairs, a failure to follow these general guidelines is likely to compound the problem—while adhering to them should at least make it possible to be heard.

## What if he can't remember?

### Question:

*My husband had a 2-year affair that I didn't find out about till 3 years later. I need my questions answered (like you've stated in other Q&A's), but my problem is he says he can't remember. He has given me some info on when it started, how it started, and a few other incidents but overall he claims he can't remember much else. He can't even remember how or when it ended, which is very important to me. How can I move past this when questions can't be answered due to the lack of memory?*

### Peggy's Response:

I certainly understand the desire to get answers to all your questions. Unfortunately, sometimes this doesn't (or can't) happen. In this instance, it sounds like the writer of this question is not doubting her husband's inability to remember—which makes a big difference. For instance, if you think your spouse has answers that they refuse to give you, it's even more difficult than when they honestly don't remember everything.

It's impossible for me to know whether any specific person can't answer or just doesn't want to answer. But it's more common than most people realize for a person really not to be able to remember some key points. I've heard of instances where someone may even acknowledge that a particular thing happened after it's shown to them through other means, but still not remember it first-hand.

On the surface, this seems impossible, but not when you take into account several factors.

1. They may not remember due to feelings of discomfort, embarrassment, or guilt that lead them to "block out" some information (partly as a way of protecting their own self-image and partly as a way of protecting the spouse from what they think would be even more hurtful disclosures).
2. They may not remember because the "details" of the experience are not as important to the person who had the affair as they are to spouse who is trying to understand what happened.
3. While it's a stereotype, in general, men don't remember "details" in the way women do—which might be a factor in a situation like the one described in this letter.
4. It doesn't seem to fit in this particular instance, but another factor may be that (although they should be able to answer most "who, what, when and where" questions), it's often almost impossible to answer questions as to "what they were thinking" or "what they were feeling" at a given point—because they may not have been clear about what they were thinking or feeling, even at the time. Affairs are by-and-large based on emotions or impulses, not on anything resembling clear thinking.

The most significant part of this whole issue of getting answers to your questions is to assess the degree to which your partner is willing to answer questions. If they're basically trying to answer (and, in fact, answering many key questions), it's more likely that they really don't remember the things they say they don't remember. But if they're saying they "can't remember" to almost every question, then that's much more problematic—unless, as mentioned earlier, the whole experience is now viewed as so traumatic that they have blocked it out.

Finally, when someone could remember and answer if they wanted to (but basically just "doesn't want to talk about it"), it's much more of a problem—and, unfortunately, a quite common

problem. In my book, *The Monogamy Myth*, I go into a good bit of detail about the primary reasons "Why a Person Won't Talk."

Below is an excerpt, listing some of these reasons (excuses):

*One of the most frustrating parts of dealing with the fact that a partner has had an affair is the incredible difficulty in getting them to talk about it. This is one of the first issues for most couples following the discovery of an affair—that the spouse who had the affair won't talk. Apparently, they are willing to do almost anything or have almost any consequence rather than discuss their affair.*

*The basic resistance to talking is not as mysterious as we might think. There are five primary reasons people won't talk about their affairs once they've been discovered:*

- *a belief in the basic code of silence*
- *a desire to maintain their self-image*
- *a belief that it's best for their partner not to know*
- *a desire to avoid the emotional reactions*
- *a desire to continue having affairs*

## What is "taking responsibility?"

*Question:*

*How do you define "taking responsibility" for the affair? My spouse says he has taken responsibility by saying he is sorry. He refuses to answer any of my questions and will not admit they had a physical relationship. He says that he will tell me what I need to know when he is ready on his terms. For me, honesty knows no terms. His therapist and our marriage counselor both said that knowing the details will not help me heal but will hurt me further. I have filed for divorce.*

*Peggy's Response:*

When it comes to "taking responsibility," let me first clarify what it is NOT. "Saying he is sorry" is not taking responsibility. And doing things "when he is ready on his terms" is not taking responsibility. (Frankly, the one who had the affair is not the one who decides what constitutes "taking responsibility.")

First of all, taking responsibility means acknowledging that his actions (in having an affair) are the cause of the pain being experienced by his spouse—and therefore it's up to him to do whatever it takes to help alleviate that pain. This usually involves taking certain specific actions, including: 1. Severing contact with the third party; 2. Answering whatever questions are asked (for as long as they are asked); 3. Hanging in through the long (approximately 2-year) process of overcoming the emotional impact of this experience.

As for "knowing the details," each person needs to decide for themselves the timing of when/what/how much they want to know. No one should be forced to hear things they don't want to hear; but if they do want to hear details, they deserve to have their questions answered. So "telling the details" (when asked) is a critical element in demonstrating whether someone is "taking responsibility."

The importance of knowing the details, however, is not so much about getting the details per se as it is about the partner's willingness to give the details. If the information didn't exist, it wouldn't be so frustrating and demeaning. But knowing your partner has information that they simply refuse to give you makes it extremely difficult to rebuild the relationship.

While, of course, "knowing the details" hurts, the bottom line for most people is that "not knowing" hurts worst of all—because their imagination fills in the blanks and the wondering never ceases. So it's worth making every effort to talk through the situation before giving up.

However, if there is an unwillingness to "take responsibility" (as described above), then it's doubtful if trust can ever be restored. While this doesn't automatically mean the marriage must end (since some people do remain married under these circumstances), it's likely to be a deadened, meaningless marriage.

## Why does he get so angry?

*Question:*

*I have strong feelings that there's someone else, but don't have any physical proof. I can't even talk to him about us or how I feel! ....he gets angry and blows me off. I don't know what to do.*

*Peggy's Response:*

This is a very painful position to be in. I know from firsthand experience, it can be absolutely crazy-making. But this kind of strong reaction to questioning is not uncommon—especially when someone has something to hide. This is often an effective way to stifle further conversation. While there are exceptions, of course, the intensity of the reaction often corresponds to the validity of the questions. For instance, as the suspicions of an affair grow stronger and the questions become more probing and more frequent, the denials of an affair are likely to become more vehement.

When the denial includes an attack on the person asking the questions, it's more likely that the suspicions are true. A harsh response may be an attempt to bring any additional questioning to a halt. When someone isn't trying to hide something, they are more likely to respond in a calm (perhaps even comforting and reassuring) way; but a person who has something to hide is more likely to react defensively and make accusations in return. When someone is absolutely clear about the honesty of their response to a question (whether it's about affairs or some other issue), they do not feel threatened and do not feel the need to be defensive or critical. It's the lack of confidence in their own integrity that usually causes this kind of overreaction.

Having said that, there's still no way to know absolutely whether or not there is someone else. But the first consideration in confronting these suspicions is being sure you really want to know. It's important to genuinely want the truth, rather than just reassurance. And it's important to be "prepared" to either stay married or get a divorce before forcing a confrontation.

There are many factors to consider as to whether/when/how to force a confrontation. Each person has to live with the consequences of their choices about this, so it's important to go about any decisions or actions in a way that best fits your own personal situation. Hopefully, some of this general perspective can be helpful in that effort. And it might also help to talk through this dilemma with a trusted friend or family member—to ensure support through this personal struggle.

## Should I stop asking?

### *Question:*

*When I last asked my husband questions about his affair, he said "Is it wise to keep asking about her and having me think about her? I could be thinking of the good times with her." Should I stop asking anything more, so he won't think about her??*

### Peggy's Response:

I suspect that the wife who wrote the above letter "senses" that the seemingly rational argument for not answering her questions is more a convenient excuse than a legitimate reason. This doesn't necessarily mean that a person who offers this kind of reason for not answering is deliberately making up an excuse—but almost everyone scans their brain for some reasonable-sounding excuse not to answer questions. And this sounds like a good argument.

If you analyze any particular argument, however, it all comes down to the same thing: "I really don't want to have to talk about this." And the false premise of this particular argument is fairly easy to uncover. While "privately" thinking about her might lead to "thinking of the good times," it's highly unlikely that someone will focus on the good times when thinking about her in the context of responding to questions from a hurt wife.

This is such an emotional situation that it's very difficult to think clearly—but there's nothing wrong with thinking you deserve answers to your questions. As I've said before, the most significant aspect of getting answers to your questions is the responsibility and caring that's demonstrated by your partner being *willing* to do whatever you need to help you in dealing with your pain—which almost always includes answering your questions.

## Should I forget my questions?

*Question:*

*Do you think I should just forget my questions that I have concerning the affair? Is it best not to bring it up?*

Peggy's Response:

I have addressed this precise issue in *The Monogamy Myth*, so I'll quote some of that material as well as offering some personal reflections on it.

When a person discovers their mate is having an affair, their world suddenly turns upside down. In order to recover any sense of balance, they need to get more information and understanding of the situation. Without answers to their questions, they convince themselves that the answers must all be bad; otherwise why wouldn't they be told what they want to know. They feel they're being treated like a child, and they resent it. If the information didn't exist, it wouldn't be so frustrating and demeaning. But they know their partner has it, and simply refuses to give it to them. This makes a balance of power in the relationship impossible. It's doubtful if trust can ever be restored in a relationship where this persists.

(end of excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*)

It was always clear to me that I wanted to know everything about James's affairs. I don't think anyone should have to know details they don't want to know. But I do think that anyone who really wants to know everything (like I did) deserves to be told. I remember how tough it was on my husband when I continually asked more and more questions. Intellectually, I wanted to move on and get over it, but emotionally I needed the ongoing support and understanding he gave me. It was extremely important that he never said, "enough is enough, let's get on with our lives." We've seen how difficult this is for most people to do; but trying to bury this issue without discussing it is simply burying it alive—and it just keeps coming back. The unanswered questions become a barrier, making certain a couple will never be as close as they'd like.

## Should I ask questions?

*Question:*

*My husband had an affair, and I understand that it's important to get answers to my questions if I want the marriage to last. But I'm not sure I want (or can take) the answers. What should I do?*

Peggy's Response:

It's not that "getting answers to your questions" is essential for the marriage to *last* (since people can certainly stay married without getting their questions answered), but a partner's willingness to answer questions is usually an essential part of being able to rebuild the trust and build a strong relationship for the future. Since most people would prefer a "meaningful" marriage (instead of a deadened, meaningless one), having their questions answered makes a big difference.

However, I have never said that it's necessary to *ask* questions; only that it's essential to *get answers* if you *do* ask. No one should be forced to hear things they don't want to hear; but if they do want to hear details, they deserve to have their questions answered. Each person needs to decide for themselves the timing of when/what/how much they *want* to know. For people, "not knowing" is worst of all—because their imagination fills in the blanks and the wondering never ceases. But this is an individual situation; just because it's true for *most* people, it may not be true for *everyone*. Also, of course, it's important to be sure you really want the *truth*, and are not just hoping for some kind of reassurance or disclaimer.

So it's the *willingness* of the partner to answer questions that is so critical, not whether or not you *ask* for the answers. While getting answers to your questions appears to be an important factor in rebuilding the marriage and the trust, forcing yourself to ask things you don't really want to know (when you're not ready to hear it) is *not* helpful. Also, of course, it's good to keep the perspective that this is a *general* pattern of "what works;" not an absolute.

## When will I get the whole truth?

*Question:*

*I found out about my wife's affair about 3 months ago. She has answered a lot of my questions, but I have a nagging feeling that there's probably more. When I push for more information, she gets very upset and seems reluctant to tell me anything else. How can I know whether or not she's told me everything?*

Peggy's Response:

"The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." That's what most of us want when dealing with a partner's affair. However, that's almost never the way it happens. (My situation where James immediately answer any and all questions—and continued to do so over and over again—is unusual.) The normal pattern is to say as little as possible.

For instance, it helps to keep in mind that the basic underlying attitude (sometimes even unconsciously held) of most people who have an affair is: "Never tell. If questioned, deny it. If caught, say as little as possible."

So the initial acknowledgment of an affair is usually just the first step. (An good illustration of the slow, labored process is to think in terms of peeling an onion, one thin layer at a time.) For instance, at first, there may be an admission of an "emotional" affair that didn't involve sex. Later, an admission of a one-time sexual experience; eventually more than one; maybe eventually more than one person, etc..... You get the picture.

So naturally, it's hard to know if/when you've finally gotten "the *whole* truth." This is why this whole process of getting beyond affairs can take such time and patience. You can't usually know for sure whether you've "heard it all" until some time has passed. And the "real" healing doesn't fully begin until that time comes.

This description of the process need not be discouraging; in fact, it can be helpful in fully accepting the reality of the time and effort required—so that it isn't too quickly "set aside" due to the pain of dealing with it. This certainly doesn't mean that there can't be progress on rebuilding the relationship during this time. In fact, the very nature of working on the rebuilding process can help the other person be more open to "telling it all."

As I've pointed out before, even though it may not be "fair," there's little likelihood of continuing to get the "truth" if every bit of truth revealed is met with immediate punishment. This is a painful process for everyone, so it requires being clear that you really want the truth—and doing what it takes to support the telling. My own way of dealing with the painful feelings related to the "facts" I was told was to focus on the more important positive significance of being told "the whole truth."

## How can I deal with learning there was more?

*Question:*

*After I discovered my husband had an emotional affair (he tried more, but the other woman stopped it), he cut contact with the other woman, and he answered all my questions. I was devastated. He said he loved me & wanted to work it out. We went to counseling, our relationship became closer than ever. Last night, he said because he loved me he couldn't continue to lie, and he confessed they did have sex and then refused to answer any questions, saying he has told me everything, let 's move on. I feel betrayed all over again.*

**Peggy's Response:**

The above letter describes the understandable devastation at learning that there's more to the situation than first acknowledged. Unfortunately, it's quite common for the full story not to come out with the first admission. The tendency is to only admit to whatever has been discovered. (As I've repeatedly pointed out, the common mindset among people having affairs is: "Never tell. If questioned, deny it. If caught, say as little as possible.")

While it may be hard to imagine finding anything positive in having a later admission of more details about an affair (as in the above situation), this actually represents a positive shift on the part of the person who had an affair. Usually, when someone voluntarily shares more information later, it's a sign of their growing sense of closeness with their spouse—and a desire to be even closer through more honesty. (Note the reference above to the fact that the "relationship became closer than ever.") This kind of situation often leads to a desire to stop lying and tell the truth.

So despite the pain of learning the facts of the greater involvement, there's also reason to find hope in the reason the facts were shared, which is a desire to build a better relationship based on honesty. One thing that can help is remembering that it's not as if the facts didn't exist until they were shared; (the facts are the same either way—whether or not you know about them). So learning this additional information may be the "lesser of the evils" in that it's better to "know the facts" than to "*not* know the facts." Not knowing prevents a couple from becoming as close as might otherwise be possible.

On the other hand, refusing to answer any more questions also prevents a couple from growing closer and interferes with healing and rebuilding the marriage. So the primary focus at this point needs to be on pushing for continuing the honest communication, getting answers to questions and thoroughly working through everything that has happened.

## Can you "move on" after only a few months?

*Question #1:*

*It has been only two months since I have found out about my husband's physical and emotional affair. He is ready to put it behind him and so am I. How do I let go of all the hurt feelings and insecurities so that I can move on and live a normal life like he wants?*

*Question #2:*

*It has been about 4 months since I found out that my husband was having an affair. I was wondering is it possible for me to have forgiven them both so soon? I feel like I am over it and love him like it never happened he is an amazing man but I read that it takes along time to deal with it. I am miserable when I think I am angry but in reality I am not. Am I really over it? I feel like I am.*

**Peggy's Response:**

Since dealing with an affair is so painful for everyone involved, there's a tendency to try to "move on" as quickly as possible. The person who had an affair obviously would prefer not to deal with it or to continue talking about it (for many reasons—some selfish and some due to a false sense of what's best for the spouse). And the spouse's pain is usually so great that they too would like to move on.

Unfortunately, it just doesn't work that way. It takes time to integrate this new reality into your life experience. And when a couple tries to "put the affair behind us and go on" without fully dealing with it, they set themselves up for failure. Anytime this issue is set aside (and buried) without thoroughly discussing it and getting as much understanding as possible, it's simply "buried alive" and keeps coming back over and over again.

Even if they succeed in avoiding talking about the affair, the pain or anger often continue indefinitely. And the emotions can come out in all kinds of distorted ways as the resentment at not dealing with it gives way to nit-picking all kinds of other issues that have nothing to do with affairs.

This has the effect of polluting any possibility of a real bond or connection. So while people may stay married, it's likely to become a deadened, meaningless marriage. You simply can't sweep something this significant under the rug and pretend it didn't happen or didn't have a lasting impact.

It's not enough for someone to say they're sorry for their actions or to makes promises about the future. They need to take responsibility for their actions by being willing to answer questions and talk through the whole situation.

Only when people gain information, understanding, and perspective are they prepared to overcome the anger or depression—and truly "forgive." And frankly, any effort at "forgiveness" or "moving on" without having fully addressed the whole situation is usually an exercise in futility.

The following is an excerpt from an Article on my website: Affairs 101: Overview of Affairs.

*Seeing affairs only as a personal failure of you or your spouse or your particular marriage inevitably leads to personal blame, personal shame, wounded pride, and almost universal feelings of devastation. Self-help strategies alone seldom bring full recovery from this experience, either as a couple or individually. Recovery depends on getting beyond our*

*strictly personal view of affairs and gaining an understanding of them within a broader framework.*

## How can I bring up his affair?

*Question:*

*My husband feels that as long as we are having a good day or week we should not bring up his affair. He doesn't seem to understand that if I can't talk about it whenever I need to that the pain starts a slow build up to a boil and then we have an awful day. How can I approach him with feelings and thoughts and questions on "good days" without ruining them?*

Peggy's Response:

"Not bringing it up" a spouse's affair doesn't mean "not thinking about it." No matter how much a person wishes they could avoid *thinking* about it, they *will* think about it for a very long time. The most effective way to finally reach the point of not thinking about it (or at least not feeling the pain when thinking about it) is by *talking* through it. *not* talking only delays the time when both people can finally get beyond it and go on with their lives.

It's unreasonable for the person who had an affair to expect their spouse to suffer alone in silence—"pretending" they're OK when they're not. It's like ignoring the elephant in the room or burying your head in the sand. And it won't go away just because everyone may *wish* it would go away. You can't just bury it—because that's actually burying it alive, and it will come back to haunt you and to be a barrier to ever fully recovering.

Naturally, it's desirable to experience some genuine "good days"—but trying to deny the reality of the need to talk in order to protect those days is taking a very short-sighted view of this whole process. The goal needs to be to reach a point where there are a *lot* of good days that are genuinely good (by virtue of having reached a point of understanding about what has happened) rather than having good days that are based on denial of the overall situation.

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*.

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.

### **Am I wrong to want everything to be honest?**

*Question:*

*I discovered over a year ago that my wife ( of 20 years) had been having an oral affair with a co-worker for over 2 years. We are in counseling because we both want to stay together. I am having a hard time dealing with the unknowns of their relationship especially some things that he told me and she denies. Her counselor told her to tell me nothing more about it, but I can't seem to agree with that because I want everything honest and true. Am I wrong to want my wife to come clean?*

**Peggy's Response:**

I've addressed this issue many times—but it's so common (and so serious) that I'll revisit it again. In a situation like the above (where, supposedly, the spouse's counselor "told her to tell me nothing more about it")—that may or may not be the case. It's possible that the spouse is simply saying this as a way of avoiding sharing information. On the other hand, unfortunately, far too many counselors do advise against answering questions. (In fact, this is the number one frustration with counseling that I have heard during the past 20 years.)

However, almost all the therapists who are considered "experts" in dealing with extramarital affairs (like Frank Pittman, whose practice is almost entirely focused on dealing with this issue, and Shirley Glass, who also specializes in the area of affairs) agree with my belief: "a willingness to answer whatever questions a spouse *wants* to know is *essential* to recovery."

## Does asking questions impede our reconnection?

*Question:*

*My husband says the more I read about affairs, the more upset I get, then ask questions and this impedes our reconnection. He does not trust that I'll not bring up the affair for many months or years.*

Peggy's Response:

This general issue of "asking questions" is the most prevalent issue that people ask about. That's because the desire to avoid answering questions is so prevalent. A person who has had an affair understandably would like to "put it behind and go on" (*without* talking about it)—and the spouse understandably has an intense "need to know" (in order to try to make some kind of sense out of what has happened).

The classic position of people having affairs is: "Never tell; if questioned, deny it; if caught, say as little as possible." So this belief in "saying as little as possible" leads them to come up with a wide variety of "reasons/excuses" for not wanting to answer questions—and the above is a common example.

Actually, "reading about affairs" isn't what makes someone "more upset;" it's not getting answers to their questions that makes them more upset. Likewise, reading about affairs does not make it more likely that a person will "bring up the affair for many months or years." Without *answers*, most people will continue to bring up the affair—forever.

The bottom line is that it's perfectly reasonable for a person to get answers to their questions. It's the least they deserve. Instead of focusing only on the potential drawbacks to answering questions, there needs to be a focus on some of the drawbacks to *not* answering questions. I've written about some of these before, but here's a quick overview of *some* of the factors:

- If someone knows something you want to know—and won't tell you, it makes you feel like a child. This creates an imbalance of power so that there can never be a sense of fairness and equality in the relationship.

- If you can't trust your spouse to be honest about the past, how can you trust they'll be honest in the future.

- "Not knowing" is worse than any particular facts—because the imagination is worst of all.

- As I've said many times, it's the WILLINGNESS to answer questions (thus showing a commitment to doing what's necessary to rebuild trust) that is so important; not the answers per se.

## What about telling the details?

*Question:*

*I insisted on knowing all the details of my wife's affair, including dates and times they met and everything they did. I told her it was better to know the details, and that it would help me to know exactly what took place rather than to always wonder. It was the most difficult thing she ever had to do, but she thought I was entitled to know if that's what I wanted. But it's so difficult on both of us. I wonder if she made a mistake by telling me all the details.*

Peggy's Response:

First of all, it's true that unanswered questions create enormous problems, including:

- an inability to trust honesty in the future if no honesty about the past
- feelings of being treated "like a child" when someone knows something you want to know, but won't tell you
- an imbalance of power and equality in the relationship by virtue of being unwilling to tell.

Now, having said this, there still is no guarantee that "telling" will make things OK. Even when telling *seems* to have created problems, it's likely that *not telling* would have been even worse. (This is similar to taking medicine that doesn't *seem* to have cured the problem, when, in fact, there's no way to know just how bad the problem might have been *without* the medicine.)

So it may be a little like "damned if you do, damned if you don't." *still*, the best bet is on "telling." Because the problems in telling may primarily be affected by a false belief that this can be quickly overcome. As I've said before, I've never known *anyone* (including myself) who completely recovers from the emotional impact of a spouse's affair in less than 2 years—even with the best efforts by everyone concerned.

So while "second-guessing" the telling is understandable, it's probably still better than the alternative might have been. Time, patience, and continued efforts toward honest communication are still the best bets to getting through this.

## How much should we talk about her affair?

### Question:

*My wife of only 2 years had an online affair which shredded my heart. I want to get over this and have read that it needs to be discussed over and over again. We have discussed it, and I am not sure now what else to ask. I think I know all the details I want to know. What then should the focus of our discussions be? I don't want her to just be a pin-cushion for my complaining about how crummy I feel.*

### Peggy's Response:

This letter calls for some clarification of the whole idea of discussing an affair. It's not that it "needs to be discussed over and over again;" it's that it needs to be discussed enough to feel there's some understanding of what happened, what can be learned from it, and how to proceed in the future. In fact, going "over and over" the same thing is not the point of talking in the first place. The importance of talking is for the sake of "moving the process along."

As for "knowing all the details I want to know"—there's no reason for anyone to push for more information/facts/details than they want to know. While a person deserves to get answers to any questions they want to ask, they do not need ask questions if they don't want to know details. It's not so much the "knowing" or "not knowing" as the willingness of the partner to answer whatever questions their partner wants to know about. It's this willingness to commit to doing whatever helps in the recovery that makes a difference in rebuilding the relationship and moving toward the ability to trust in the future.

So the focus of any discussions should only be whatever the hurt spouse wants them to be. It's usually not wise to have no discussions (since issues tend to get buried that come back later to create problems)—but it's also not wise to force any particular discussions. While it's not useful to "dump" on your partner by "complaining about how crummy I feel"—it's probably healthy to share your feelings with your partner so they'll know what's going on. When these feelings are held in and not shared, then when they inevitably eventually come out again, the partner is surprised/disappointed because they had falsely assumed everything was OK.

## How can I go on without discussing the affair?

### Question:

*My wife had an eight-year affair with a former high school boy friend, actually one from 29 years ago. We went to one counselor, who mainly discussed how we could improve our married life. We rarely talked about the affair, never with any details. I love my wife dearly, but can not go on in this marriage.*

### Peggy's Response:

The above is more a "statement" than a "question." But it's such an important point that I want to focus on it—and to verify the legitimacy of any spouse who feels a counselor/therapist needs to focus specifically on the affair, not just on general marital problems. (This stance tends to "add insult to injury.")

The difficulty in recovering, healing, and/or going on with the marriage is greatly affected by whether or not there is a direct focus on dealing with the affair itself—including answering all questions and thoroughly talking through it. I've known this from the many times I've heard it during the past 20 years. However, the statistical results from my Survey on Extramarital Affairs (with responses from 1,083 people whose spouses had affairs) is clear.

In addition, everyone who completed the questionnaire was invited to submit "Comments" with suggestions for therapists as to how they could be more effective in helping people deal with affairs. I'm still going through all those comments and organizing them by themes.

Here are some quotes from just a few of the many comments that relate to this particular issue:

*"Therapist needs to deal directly with the affair—not just general marital problems. He sees it as we "both" were wrong, so let's just forget it and go on. I see a tremendous difference in marriage problems and sleeping with someone. As a result, we are presently talking about divorce so we can at least move in some direction. I think if someone would have encouraged us to talk about it instead of just "deal with prior marriage problems and move on," we would have been able to work through it."*

*"I think the hardest part of therapy was that the therapist kept seeing the affair as a "symptom" of the marriage disease, when actually the marriage was pretty strong before the affair. The therapist kept wanting to make it "equal blame." I needed to hear that nothing I did "made" him have the affair, and I never heard that from the therapist. (It was only reading some books about affairs that I felt I was right to think my husband had crossed the line, and that his behavior was his own fault, not mine.) We did a bit of "therapist-shopping" and I did find a counselor who didn't placate my husband, and told me over and over that his actions were his doing, not mine, but of course he never heard that). One thing I did appreciate was that all the counselors we saw honored our attempt to rebuild the marriage and didn't ever suggest divorce, though one said our chances of survival were slim."*

*"Therapists need to teach the person who had the affair to take responsibility for their actions and to not find the blame in the other partner. There are always options within a relationship and hurting the one you love should not be an option to express dissatisfaction within the marriage."*

*"I believe strongly that it is inappropriate for a therapist or counselor to tell a couple to move past the affair issue and on to the general problems in the marriage before thoroughly discussing the affair."*

“Therapists: Do not treat the affair the same as other marital problems. It overshadows issues of communication or division of work in the home. To treat it as just one of many problems is insensitive and insulting. This is a grief process, at least two years long.”

Our therapist doesn't seem to think we will profit by discussing the affair directly, rather would prefer to just work on other issues between us. I feel the affair is the single biggest issue between us, and we should be discussing this much more in depth, and directly dealing with the affair. Our affair was years in the past when he finally admitted it to me, and the therapist seems to think it is "too far back" to work on. But how else will I get over this?"

*"It is ridiculous to think that soon after an affair is discovered and a couple is in therapy that any work on the marriage can occur right away. The only focus should be on surviving the emotional turmoil by helping the couple discuss the affair; not the marriage, but the affair. Anyone doing work with the subject must educate themselves on what support is available to people i.e. support groups, names of books and authors, etc."*

These quotes are included in my eBook available on the website, titled: *Help for Therapists and their Clients in Dealing with Affairs*.

It's important to read/think/talk/learn more about this whole issue. Everyone, including counselors and therapists, needs to be better educated about the reality of "what works" and "what doesn't" in recovering from affairs. My website is dedicated to that goal.

Finally, here's an excerpt from one of my Articles about the fallacy of assuming that affairs are due to problems in the marriage, specifically to a failure in Meeting Your Partner's Needs:

"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."

## What if honesty leads to arguments?

*Question:*

*I understand that it is our partner's responsibility and willingness to answer questions that offers comfort in our situation, but what about the emotional abuse that the other party might face with answering questions that lead to arguments—arguments that sometimes children overhear?*

Peggy's Response:

This question refers to my consistent statements about the importance of answering questions in order to facilitate healing and rebuilding the marriage—and specifically the significance of the WILLINGNESS of the one who had an affair to answer questions.

However, while it may not seem "fair," the one who asks for details has a responsibility to hear them in a way that doesn't punish the partner for doing what they've asked them to do. It's simply not "smart" to punish someone for being honest, despite the potential pain from the honesty, because it means the honesty will be unlikely to continue. Responding to honest answers with emotional abuse that leads to arguments (as described in the above question) is clearly not going to lead to healing or rebuilding. And, as indicated above, it can create additional trauma for children.

I personally know how difficult it is to hear this kind of information without reacting in a way that shuts down future efforts to get answers to our questions. But we sabotage our own desire for the truth unless we find ways to reinforce our partner's honesty.

Here are some ideas about this that are excerpted from my book, *The Monogamy Myth*.

"Reinforcing Honesty

*The ability to succeed in dealing honestly with an affair does not depend solely on the attitude and behavior of the one who had the affair. Their partner's reaction is critical because it serves either to reinforce honesty or to discourage it. Honesty about affairs comes in stages. First, there is the admission that it happened, then the many details that contribute to seeing the whole picture. A partner's reaction to the initial fact of the affair has a lot to do with the willingness of the person who had an affair to share any of the details.*

*A person who discovers their mate's affair usually feels justified in venting their feelings of hurt and anger. While they certainly have a right to those feelings, they need to recognize that punishing their mate for telling the truth will almost surely put an end to any further honesty. So while it may seem unfair, it's in their own best interest to try to reinforce whatever honesty is received if there is to be much hope for the honesty continuing.*

*Supporting a partner's honesty often takes enormous patience. One man said he felt his effort to get his wife to open up and talk was like peeling an onion, with each skin coming off very hard. He continued to encourage her and to show his appreciation for her efforts to be honest, so she finally became convinced it was safe to tell him the truth. It took a long time, but they were able to stay together and develop a relationship that was closer than it had been prior to the affair.*

*In another case, a man told of the terrible price his wife paid for being honest with him about her affair. By his own admission, he lashed out at her to try to hurt her back. She decided she had made a mistake by being honest about her affair and became afraid to tell him anything else. But she hung in without trying to defend herself against his constant barrage of*

*criticism. Finally, he came to realize that she must love him very much to tolerate all he had put her through. He felt thankful she hadn't left, and began trying to make up for the damage that had been done.*

This can be quite a challenge for the person who asks for honesty—to avoid punishing their partner for telling them what they want to know. It's understandable that a person feels badly about some of the information they receive, but this can be balanced by feeling good about their partner's honesty. This was my experience, feeling so positive about James' honesty in answering everything I asked him that it diminished the pain of what he had to say. This kind of honest communication is important, not only in dealing with what has happened, but in determining the nature of the relationship in the future."

(end of excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*)

## What do you mean by "responsible" honesty?

*Question:*

*In your response to an earlier question, you wrote "complete, responsible honesty." Please explain the word "responsible" in context to recovery from an affair.*

**Peggy's Response:**

Effectively dealing with the aftermath of an affair requires working to reestablish a basis of trust, aimed at developing true intimacy. This kind of trust and intimacy comes only from "responsible honesty"—which involves "full disclosure" to each other through sharing your deepest hopes and fears on an ongoing basis.

As for a definition of "responsible honesty," it's honesty that is pursued specifically for the purpose of strengthening the bond and the connection between you. The focus of responsible honesty is on sharing about yourself, not sharing criticisms or complaints about the other person. (One "trick" to staying on track is the old adage of using "I" statements instead of "you" statements.) When the intent/motive of the honesty is to really know each other, the honesty will be open-minded and open-ended.

Actually, it may be easier to show what is *not* "responsible" honesty. For instance, we've all heard someone say, "Can I be perfectly honest with you?" When that happens, we immediately think, "Oh no, we're about to get criticized." This may be a form of honesty, but it's not "responsible" honesty. Honesty that is used to vent or to hurt or to put down or to prove you're right, etc., drives wedges between people and creates distance. Whereas "responsible honesty" builds bridges and draws you closer through fully sharing yourselves with each other so you can really know each other.

Here's an excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth* that explains this in more detail:

### *A COMMITMENT TO HONESTY*

*The way to rebuild trust is...by making a commitment to honesty. There's a tendency to think of honesty only as telling something that was previously kept secret. But the main power of honesty is in sharing feelings. When a couple share their deepest feelings about everything, including the "scary" stuff (like attractions to other people or fears of their partner having an affair), they develop a deeper understanding of each other. Many people think that talking about such emotional issues will inevitably cause problems. But it's far more likely that it will lead to a closer relationship because of the comfort involved in feeling you will be told the truth about anything that comes up.*

*It's ironic that while honesty is recognized as important to a relationship, most people also fear it and see it as a risk to the security of the relationship. Unfortunately, they fail to see the risk involved with dishonesty. Part of the reason for the current fear of honesty is because of the kind of honesty that became prevalent in the 60's with "saying it like it is" and "letting it all hang out." This led many people to see honesty as thoughtlessly hurting each other with bluntness, which, in turn, led to excusing dishonesty as tact and kindness toward others. This is a narrow, shortsighted view of honesty and a naive view of dishonesty.*

*Of course, honesty can be harmful if it's practiced with no regard for its impact on the other person. But there's much more involved than simply deciding whether to be honest. It's important to...pay attention to timing, motivation, and caring.*

*The fear of being hurt is one of the main drawbacks to a wholehearted pursuit of honesty. Because of this fear, many people question just how much honesty is good or desirable in an intimate relationship. They rationalize that they're being honest as long as they're not actively lying. But honesty is much more than simply not lying; it's not withholding information or feelings that are important to the relationship. The idea of this kind of "total" honesty seems so unrealistic and unachievable for most people that they may feel there's no point in even trying to be honest. But developing honesty is a process, not an event. And the goal for each couple (which is certainly attainable) is to gradually increase their level of honesty.*

*Our honesty is not restricted to issues related to affairs; we're honest about everything relevant to our relationship. This includes talking about our personal hopes and dreams as well as our private fears and anxieties. While this kind of honesty brings a special bond to a relationship, there's a personal benefit as well that is often overlooked. Honesty provides a firm place to stand in the world. It forms a solid basis from which to embark upon the challenges of everyday life.”*

(end of excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*)

## Is it reasonable to want to talk about the affair?

*(Since I receive so many questions about the unwillingness of the spouse to answer questions about the affair, I will again offer some details about the importance of talking through what has happened in order to recover and rebuild the marriage. Below are two letters from the many I receive on this topic.)*

### Question #1:

*Four months ago, I discovered my wife was having an affair with her boss. I confronted her with evidence, she confessed, and she has ended the relationship with the lover. We have committed to restoring the marriage. She does not want to talk about it much anymore, and I still feel the need for discussion of the affair.*

### Question #2:

*My husband's affair has been discovered and acknowledged for six months. He has broken it off and we are trying to rebuild our marriage. I still have questions and am trying to make some sense of the 7 years that he has been unfaithful. Although I am not throwing it up into his face, the mere mention of the events of the affair shut him down. He refuses to talk, and those friends whom we have told, counsel me to forgive and go on. Is it reasonable to ask about the framework of the events?*

### Peggy's Response:

During the past 20 years, the most prevalent issue people have asked me about is "talking about the affair." That's because the person who has had an affair would like to "put it behind and go on" without talking about it—while the spouse has an intense "need to know" in order to try to make some kind of sense out of what has happened before they are able to "go on").

The needs of the two people are very different, and the reasons for their needs are different as well. Here's a brief overview of "why the person who had an affair doesn't want to talk" and "why the spouse wants to talk and get answers."

Why the person who had an affair doesn't want to talk:

(Each of these is discussed in detail in my book, *The Monogamy Myth*.)

--*Belief in the Basic Code of Silence:*

*("Never tell; if questioned, deny it; if caught, say as little as possible")*

--*Feelings of guilt and shame*

--*Protecting their partner's feelings*

--*Avoiding a showdown*

--*May want to continue having affairs*

Why the spouse wants to talk and get answers:

--If you have no opportunity to get information to try to "make sense" of something that has turned your life upside down, you have no way of getting beyond it.

--If someone knows something you want to know (but won't tell you), it makes you feel like a child, creating an imbalance of power with no sense of fairness or equality in the relationship.

--If you can't trust your spouse to be honest about the past, how can you trust they'll be honest in the future.

--"Not knowing" is worse than any particular facts—because the imagination is worst of all.

--The willingness to answer questions shows a commitment to doing what's necessary to rebuild trust. (This willingness is even more important than the answers per se.)

It's reasonable to want answers.

The bottom line is that it's perfectly reasonable for a person to want to talk and get answers to their questions. Each person needs to decide for themselves the timing of when/what/how much they want to know (and no one should be forced to hear things they don't want to hear), but if they do want to hear details, they deserve to have their questions answered.

I had been aware of the benefits of talking from all the years of hearing the stories of people who shared with me. The results of my Survey on Affairs confirmed that getting answers to questions and thoroughly discussing the details of the affair increase the likelihood of maintaining and rebuilding the marriage and increase the likelihood of recovering from a spouse's affair.

While it's possible to stay married without getting answers to questions, it's likely to be a deadened, meaningless marriage. Answering questions is usually an essential part of being able to rebuild trust and build a strong relationship for the future. Since most people would prefer a "meaningful" marriage to a "deadened, meaningless" one, having their questions answered makes a big difference.

Most of the time when you can't get answers to your questions, your partner is hoping that at some point you'll give up and that this will just "go away" and no longer be an issue. It sometimes helps to make it clear that this will always be an issue—whether or not it is dropped as a topic of conversation. (While obviously, no one can "make" their spouse talk, they can make it clear that this will always remain as a barrier between them.)

It's unreasonable for the person who had an affair to expect their spouse to suffer alone in silence—"pretending" they're OK when they're not. It's like ignoring the elephant in the room or burying your head in the sand. And it won't go away just because everyone may wish it would go away. You can't just bury it—because that's actually burying it alive, and it will come back to haunt you and to be a barrier to ever fully recovering.

As I've said before, I've never known anyone (including myself) who completely recovered from the emotional impact of a spouse's affair in less than 2 years—even with the best efforts by everyone concerned. However, let me clarify the whole idea of discussing an affair. It's not that it needs to be discussed "over and over again;" it's that it needs to be discussed enough to feel there's some understanding of what happened, what can be learned from it, and how to proceed in the future. In fact, going "over and over" the same thing is not the point of talking in the first place. The importance of talking is for the sake of "moving the process along."

Among those people (including myself) who have most thoroughly recovered from a spouse's affair, the key is talking through the whole situation for as long as necessary to reach a point of putting it in perspective where this experience no longer has the power to prevent you from going on with your life. The goal is not to get to the point of "never talking about it." (That does not represent recovery.) The goal is to get to the point where you can talk about it—without the talking triggering the old painful feelings.

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

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.

Our responsibility in "reinforcing honesty:"

While it may not seem "fair," the one who asks for details about the affair has a responsibility to hear them in a way that doesn't punish the partner for doing what they've asked them to do. It's simply not "smart" to punish someone for being honest (despite the potential pain from the honesty) because it means the honesty will be unlikely to continue. Responding to honest answers with emotional abuse that leads to arguments is clearly not going to lead to healing or rebuilding.

I personally know how difficult it is to hear this kind of information without reacting in a way that shuts down future efforts to get answers to our questions. But we sabotage our own desire for the truth unless we find ways to reinforce our partner's honesty. The key to being able to handle the painful facts that may be disclosed through this process is to consciously remind yourself that the honesty and commitment represented by the willingness to answer questions is more positive than the painful facts themselves are negative. No matter how hard it was to hear the facts (about the past), I was comforted by the more significant fact that he was being Honest (in the present) and respecting my "need to know."

I strongly encourage the hurt spouse to read one of the "Articles about Affairs" posted on my website titled "The Need to Know"—especially the section on "Reinforcing Honesty."

## Do they have a right to keep secrets?

*Question:*

*What do you consider a secret? I am still getting over the betrayal and I believe that I have a right to know everything that went on, who the betrayer confided in, etc., during and after the affair... My spouse believes that they have a right to some secrets. What's your opinion?*

Peggy's Response:

A secret is sharing a confidence with someone—and scrupulously maintaining the confidentiality of the information that is shared. However, there are times when "secrets" don't deserve to be maintained.

Secrets are normally made only with someone with whom you are extremely close and have a trusting relationship. So if someone who has had an affair insists on keeping secrets *with* others and keeping them *from* the spouse, this speaks volumes about their allegiance and commitment. Their first responsibility is to the spouse, not to others. (While it's understandable that someone may want to protect whoever they confided in, their allegiance needs to be to the spouse above all others.) The very fact of keeping these secrets (regardless of the nature of the secrets) sends a very negative message in terms of commitment to the spouse, caring for the feelings of the spouse, and desire to do what it takes to rebuild the marriage.

The "test" for whether or not to maintain a secret is to answer the question: "Who has a right to know about this?" Clearly, the spouse has a right to know anything (everything) they want to know about an affair if they are to recover and rebuild the marriage.

Sometimes a person who doesn't want to share information about the affair will claim privacy rights. The above letter at least calls it what it is—secrecy, not privacy. There is no right to "secrecy" in this kind of situation—because secrecy is about keeping something hidden or concealed from your partner. It only "adds insult to injury" in that any continuing "secrets" just perpetuate the problem and the pain.

The bottom line is that maintaining secrets is never appropriate when dealing with the fall-out from an affair. The unwillingness to do whatever is needed to reestablish trust (which means "keeping no secrets") shows a failure to accept responsibility for the behavior and for doing everything possible to support their partner's recovery and rebuild trust.

For more on the wider implications of secrecy in dealing with affairs as a whole, see the article under the "Articles about Affairs" section of the website titled "Breaking the Code of Secrecy."

## Getting answers to my questions?

*Question #1:*

*It has been close to 14 months since I discovered the affair. Recently though, I have been replaying things in my head and things still do not add up and I still have unanswered questions. Every time I ask to discuss this, my spouse gets emotional and claims that I am beating a dead horse and that I am now the one holding us back. How can I explain that there are still unanswered questions without pushing us backwards?*

*Question #2:*

*My wife has a problem with low self esteem which contributed to her affair. I have been trying to build up her self esteem, yet I feel that my needs as a result of her affair have gone unattended. I tried counseling but my wife doesn't like the fact that I go to talk and thinks that I should just get over it because she "learned her lesson." How can I get her to understand that I have needs too?*

*Question #3:*

*How do I convince my husband that I'm not trying to make him feel guilty when I ask him about his affairs? I try to discuss the subject in a way to make him understand that I'm not trying to just rehash the past, but I have so many questions that plague my mind. He wants me to forget about the past and expects me to just trust him again overnight, but he doesn't understand that part of my healing is knowing what led up to the affairs.*

*Question #4:*

*After finding out my partner of seven years was having an affair, flying off overseas, I can't accept her version of events, primarily that they did not engage in sexual activity, every time I raise an issue with her she gets angry and says we should end it, all I want is the truth even though she tells me she's told me everything. What should I do when I suspect so much more went on?*

*Question #5:*

*My husband's affair was four months ago. I know it takes 2 years to recover completely, but I am wondering how long I can bring up his affair? Sometimes I feel sad and hurt when I think he thinks I'm o.k. What can I say to him when I feel hurt and I want him to know it still hurts, without being mean or hurtful to him?*

**Peggy's Response:**

"I want/need my spouse to answer my questions!"

This has been *the* consistent message I have received since 1980 when I first began hearing from people trying to recover from this trauma. And it's the same issue, whether the person who had the affair is the husband or the wife. (Notice that the questions above are from both men and women.)

Each person needs to decide for themselves the timing of when/what/how much they want to know. But for *most* people, "not knowing" is worst of all—because their imagination fills in the blanks and the wondering never ceases.

It's clear that unanswered questions create enormous problems, including:

- an inability to trust honesty in the future if no honesty about the past
- feelings of being treated "like a child" when someone knows something you want to know,

but won't tell you

--an imbalance of power and equality in the relationship by virtue of their being unwilling to tell.

Since most people would prefer a "meaningful" marriage (instead of a deadened, meaningless one), having their questions answered makes a big difference. The importance of sharing details is not because it's so critical to know the details per se; but because of the partner's *willingness* to answer any question their spouse wants to know. In fact, this is essential to rebuilding trust.

Here's a message I received from a woman whose husband answered her questions, clearly illustrating the benefits when a spouse is willing to provide answers.

"We both now know what 'honesty and commitment' really mean. My husband has learned that honesty means not withholding information and he now answers anything I ask with total honesty. I find when I know the answer will be honest, that the question isn't that important."

The arguments made by the spouse who does *not* want to answer questions often includes an attack on the one who is wants answers—as in one of the above questions:

Every time I ask to discuss this, my spouse gets emotional and claims that I am beating a dead horse and that I am now the one holding us back. In truth, it's clear that the one "holding us back" is Not the one who is "asking," but the one who is refusing to "answer."

Most of the time when you can't get answers to your questions, your partner is hoping that at some point you'll give up and that this will just "go away" and no longer be an issue. So it's good to simply make it clear that it will *always* be an issue—whether or not it is "dropped" as a topic of conversation. While obviously, no one can "make" their spouse talk, they *can* make it clear that this will always remain as a barrier between them.

I have written a great deal about this through the years. In fact, I include a long section on "When A Person Won't Talk" in my book, *The Monogamy Myth*. And I have a long article permanently posted on the website that addresses this issue; see it listed under the "Articles about Affairs" section of the website titled "The Need to Know." I have also posted some statistical evidence showing the strong correlation between "answering questions" and "recovery and rebuilding the marriage." See the link near the bottom of the home page to a page titled "Survey Report."

## Why can't she say how she "feels" about her affair?

### Question:

*After 2-1/2 years we still have trouble talking about my wife's affair. All I seem to remember are her inconsistencies when talking about it in the past. She almost always answers my fact-based questions but struggles with the "feeling" questions. She almost never brings up the subject on her own, despite me telling her how much I want to hear how she feels about it. I know it's difficult, but if she loves me, why can't she help?*

### Peggy's Response:

All the points in the above letter are common issues for those trying to understand and deal with their spouse's affair, so I'll offer some perspective about why it's so difficult to get the kind of clarity you so desperately want from your spouse.

First of all, while the fact that "she almost never brings up the subject on her own" is terribly frustrating, it's also quite understandable. If you stop for a moment and recall any instance where you've done something wrong (no matter how "minor"), the last thing you want to do is "bring it up." (In fact, you desperately hope not to have to talk about it; and if so, to talk about it as little as possible.) Well, when it comes to something as significant as having had an affair (as big a mistake as there is), then there's going to be a natural tendency to not want to talk about it.

Having said that, I quickly want to reiterate what I've said many, many times: that if a marriage is to be rebuilt (and the "hurt" spouse) wants to talk about it (which is almost universal), then it's absolutely essential that the person who had an affair be willing to do so—for as long as it takes, which can be a very long time. But it's probably unrealistic to think that they will actually "bring up the subject on their own." So their willingness to be responsive anytime you bring it up is a better standard by which to judge the degree of caring and compassion for the pain they've caused.

As for answering questions...there are some other false perceptions about what's reasonable—or even possible. For instance, when you want/need answers, it's hard to deal with "inconsistencies" in the answers. While it's possible that the initial answer was "not the full story" and that additional information may come out later, it's also possible that they really don't remember every detail in the way you think they could/should. Since the details are actually more important to you than to the person answering the questions, you are likely to have a photographic memory for every little detail (and recall every single discrepancy, no matter how small), while they may genuinely not clearly recall every detail. (And they certainly aren't likely to remember precisely what they said or how they said it the last time they tried to answer the questions.)

Of course, if the discrepancies are huge and pervasive, then there may be some deliberate deception going on, but it's important to at least have the awareness that there is an alternative explanation that is not nearly so sinister or serious.

Finally, as far as "answering the fact-based questions but struggling with the *feeling* questions..." the fact that someone answers the fact-based questions is the clearest indicator of their veracity. Anyone should be able to reasonably answer questions that are straightforward "who, what, when, where" questions. (However, even facts can sometimes be wrong, as illustrated by the fact that my husband was wrong about the *year* of the beginning of his first affair.)

Here's an excerpt from *Beyond Affairs* where I describe this incident:

**Peggy:**

*I could sense the invisible boundary he had set up to keep me at a distance—and I could only guess as to why. I didn't "know" he was having an affair, but I had a kind of "sinking feeling" that something bad was happening—and in a sense "knew" what it was without knowing for sure.*

*In later years when James was recalling the events of his first affair he placed the time as September, 1965. I said, "Are you sure?"*

"Well, I think so. I know it was at a convention in New York. "

*"I think it had to be the meeting in September of 1966. That's when I sensed you moving away from me. I didn't know exactly what was happening at the time—but I knew it was critical."*

*"I guess that's right. Come to think of it, it would have been the 1966 convention."*

*The importance of this is not that I knew the date when James didn't, but that my sensing was so strong. I believe there are several ways to "know" something. Having facts and information is one way, and this emotional sensing is another. The intuitive feeling that your partner is having an affair can cause a great deal of pain. I believe many women "know" about affairs in this way and secretly suffer from the dilemma of what to do about it."*

(end of excerpt from *Beyond Affairs*)

As for answering questions about "how she *feels*"...

In general, answering fact-based questions is a fairly straightforward process, but answering "feeling" questions can be very problematic—even with the best of intentions and the best effort. That's because when people are engaged in affairs there is a great deal of denial and they do a great deal of rationalizing. So they're likely not to have been clear about their feelings even at the time, and at a later time they certainly aren't likely to be able to recall what those earlier feelings might have been.

So we're probably setting ourselves up for disappointment in the answers (or lack thereof) to "feeling" questions if we fail to recognize that the kind of clarity we want just may not be possible. And we don't want someone (just because they want to show "they love us") to try to conjure up some feelings to share that they can't actually recall. While this whole process (of asking questions and getting answers) can be frustrating for all concerned, it does help to have more perspective about what's reasonably possible. In the meantime, the overall attitude with which the spouse responds to questions says more about their love than does the specific answers they provide. It's their willingness to make a genuine effort that counts.

## Is it unreasonable to want to know everything?

### Question#1:

*I just found out, not coping well AT ALL. I want to know everything. Is this an unreasonable request?*

### Question #2:

*I had a short brief affair on my husband, I told him about it, we ended up separating for 2 months and I packed up my kids and moved 1800 miles away from family and friends to work on my marriage with my husband. (I had worked 12 hours a day 4 days a week and opposite shift as my husband, our good communication was not there and I turned to someone that listened, and not shut me out.) Now my husband wants every detail. I hurt and am ashamed. I love my husband very much; what can I do?*

### Peggy's Response:

Wanting (Needing!) details is almost universal among those who are trying to cope with a partner's affair. For instance, of the 1,083 spouses who participated in my Survey on Extramarital Affairs, here are the responses to the question:

Did you want to know details about the affair(s)?"

7 % - no, I didn't want to know details

31% - yes, but only general info (who, when, why)

62% - yes, wanted to know everything, including details

These results are consistent with the reports I have received from thousands of people during the past 24 years. The secrecy and the deception turn out to be even more damaging to the long-term hopes for the future of the marriage than any other aspect of the affair. So a willingness to "tell" whatever the spouse wants to know becomes critical in establishing a more honest relationship that allows trust to be rebuilt.

In any given situation, it's the spouse who needs to determine the amount that is told. No spouse should be forced to hear anything they don't want to hear. But they have the right to get answers to whatever questions they ask.

Naturally, the answers can/will be hurtful, especially immediately, but the hurt of "not knowing" can be even more painful—and more long-lasting. See my Article posted on the Website titled *The Need to Know*.

For those who are skeptical as to whether providing details is really helpful in the long run...the statistical analysis of the survey I referred to above showed the following:

--59% of those who refused to answer questions were still married

--81% of those whose partner answered some of their questions were still married

--86% of those whose partner answered all their questions were still married

Other analyses showed similar data related to "talking" and "recovery." So the results showed a clear association between "answering questions and talking through the whole situation" with "recovery and rebuilding the marriage." Specifically, they showed:

--The amount the affair was discussed with the spouse and the extent to which the spouse answered questions were significantly associated with the current marital status and quality of the marriage.

--The amount the affair was discussed with the spouse and the extent to which the spouse answered questions were significantly associated with recovery.

For more information about the importance of answering questions and talking through the entire issue, see my "Overview of Report from Survey on Extramarital Affairs" posted on the website under my Articles about Affairs.

Finally, I know first-hand how important it is to get answers to questions. Below is an excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*. (Note: The following excerpt is permanently posted as part of an article titled: "Need to Know.")

*When a person discovers their mate is having an affair, their world suddenly turns upside down. In order to recover any sense of balance, they need to get more information and understanding of the situation. Without answers to their questions, they convince themselves that the answers must all be bad; otherwise why wouldn't they be told what they want to know. They feel they're being treated like a child, and they resent it.*

*If the information didn't exist, it wouldn't be so frustrating and demeaning. But they know their partner has it, and simply refuses to give it to them. This makes a balance of power in the relationship impossible... It's doubtful if trust can ever be restored in a relationship where this persists.*

I remember how tough it was on my husband when I continually asked more and more questions. Intellectually, I wanted to move on and get over it, but emotionally I needed the ongoing support and understanding he gave me. It was extremely important that he never said, "enough is enough, let's get on with our lives." Of course, nobody would choose to go through the thousands of hours of talking about this if there were some other way. In my own case, I think it was an essential part of overcoming my feelings and finding peace of mind.

(end of excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*)

## What were his "feelings" during the affair?

*Question:*

*My husband had an affair over 5 years ago. It was particularly traumatic to me because after caught and confrontation, claiming it was over, it went on for another three months. All that time, he lied daily, swearing he never saw or spoke with her. It is now 5 years later, and while our marriage is now better and closer than it has been for 40 years, I still think of it daily, and still need more explanations re his feelings at that time. The betrayal stays with me. Isn't it time for this to end?*

Peggy's Response:

The statement in the above question that jumped out at me is: "I still need more explanations re his feelings at that time."

I've responded to this kind of inquiry several times in the past (in fact, once earlier this year), but since I continue to get so many questions about it, I'll cover some of the key points again. First, it's understandable to want to "get inside his head" and know what he was thinking/feeling. However, if this lack of explaining his feelings is the primary barrier to recovery, it may help to understand that it simply may not be possible to know his feelings—because *he* may not know himself.

While anyone should be able to answer "factual" questions like who, what, when, where... it's a great deal more difficult to accurately answer questions that explain what you were thinking or feelings related to an affair. That's because "after-the-fact," people seldom know what they were thinking or why they said or did something. And they're even less likely to be clear about how they felt at the time. (Emotions often interfere with clear thinking, and having an affair creates a variety of strong emotions: excitement, guilt, fear of getting caught, etc.)

One reason it may be difficult to know the answers to some questions (even if/when you want to answer them) is that people having affairs have often shifted things around in their heads so much to make them "fit" into a reality they can live with, that they really don't have good clarity around a lot of the details. Frankly, the details simply aren't as important to them as they now are to a spouse when they find out about the affair.

And there's a danger in trying to dredge up clarity when there never was any clarity, especially when it comes to feelings. Also, when someone is confused about the answer to some question, they often fall back on saying whatever they think might "work" in more nearly being an answer that will satisfy the questioner enough to stop the questions—which is usually the primary goal (even if subconsciously).

This understanding about some of the problems in trying to honestly answer questions in no way "excuses" trying as hard as possible to respond. Difficulty remembering in no way relieves the necessity of making the effort. It is not a justification for avoiding trying to answer. As I've written before, it's the willingness to try to answer all questions as honestly as possible that is most important.

One last word about the comment:

*"The betrayal stays with me. Isn't it time for this to end?"...*

While, as I've repeatedly said, it takes at least two years to recover from the emotional impact of a partner's affair, there is no upper time limit for when it "ends." That all depends on *both* the

actions of the one who had the affair (severing contact, answering questions, hanging in through the process of dealing with the whole issue) *and* the efforts of the "hurt" spouse.

To review what steps the "hurt" spouse can take toward their own recovery, see the Article posted on my website titled: "Keys to Personal Recovery."

## "Should" I ask for details?

*Question:*

*My wife of 16 years admitted to an affair last week, which took place 3 years ago. The affair is over and we are trying to make things work but my question is: is it best to leave the sordid details where they are or should I ask her to tell me? I would rather not be told but I will then struggle with my imagination, which at times may be worse than the actual events. Which is the best way forward?*

Peggy's Response:

The key point I want to address in the above question is:

"Should I ask her to tell me [the sordid details]?"

Here's what I've written in the past (and still stand by) about this issue:

While it's important to get answers to your questions *if* you ask questions, this does *not* mean you "should" ask questions unless/until you really want to know. It's just that it's essential to get answers if you *do* ask.

While for most people, "getting answers to your questions" is a key ingredient in rebuilding the trust and building a strong marriage, no one should be forced to hear things they don't want to hear. But if they **DO** want to hear details, they deserve to have their questions answered. It's the *willingness* of the partner to answer questions that is so critical, not whether or not you *ask* for the answers.

So each person needs to decide for themselves the timing of when/what/how much they want to know. (It's important to determine that you really want the truth, and are not just hoping for some kind of reassurance or disclaimers.) For most people, "not knowing" is worst of all - because their imagination fills in the blanks and the wondering never ceases.

Here are the responses (broken down by gender) to one of the questions in my Survey on Affairs:

The question was: Did you want to know details about the affair(s)?

6% of men and 8% of women said: "No, I didn't want to know details."

33% of men and 30% of women said: "Yes, but I wanted only general information."

60% of men and 62% of women said: "Yes, I wanted to know everything, including details."

The reason *most* people want to know details is the same reason as stated in the above question: "my imagination at times may be worse than the actual events." In fact, this precise statement is one I have heard repeatedly during the past 24 years.

Here's an excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth* that discusses this problem with imagination being worse:

*Without good information, people tend to imagine the worst; and at some point they desperately want to know where they stand and what they can count on. Here's the way some of the BAN members expressed their feelings about this need to know...*

*--I am really tormented by not knowing. My imagination has been wonderful!*

*--Nothing can be worse than all these years of not knowing what's going on and where I stand.*

Also, the statistical analyses of some of the responses to my Survey on Affairs show there is a strong correlation between "getting answers to questions and talking through the whole issue" with "recovering and rebuilding the marriage," but that would only hold true if you *wanted* to know. That's because the primary benefit to recovery and rebuilding is the *willingness* of the partner to answer *if* you want to know, *not* whether you want to ask in the first place.

So even though most people want to know details (only because it's slightly less difficult than *not* knowing), it's completely valid for each individual to decide for themselves when, what, and how much they want to know. Since each person must live with the consequences of their decision, it's completely up to them. There simply is no "should" as to the best way forward.

## How can I get answers?

*Question #1:*

*My husband kept the affair going 2 months after telling me it was over. I was still at our old house and she was here in my home doing all the things that I would be doing. I can't get over it. My husband answered a few question (although I don't think truthfully) and refuses to discuss it further. He gets furious if I try to bring it up. I need to know what happened before I can possibly let it go. How do I get him to come clean?*

*Question #2:*

*You mention "no taboo topics" in your recovery section.... It seems that every time I would love to ask my husband a question about his affair, I have to get up the courage to even ask because all questions asked by me about it are "taboo" (for him, not me). He acts as though his discomfort in answering is most important. Does "no taboo topic" mean I should be able to ask him anything? My husband has total control over when, why and what we talk about pertaining to his affair...Is this fair?*

*Question #3:*

*How can I get my husband to be honest about his affair? I need to know I am not crazy.*

**Peggy's Response:**

First, let me point out that even though all 3 of the above questions happen to be about "husbands" who won't talk, this is generally the case with "wives" who have had affairs also—in that anyone who has had an affair is reluctant/resistant to talking about it.

As I note in *The Monogamy Myth*:

*"There is a basic code of secrecy among those having affairs:  
Never tell. If questioned, deny it. If caught, say as little as possible."*

It can be crazy-making when you desperately want answers about the affair, but your partner won't talk about it. It also makes it much more difficult to rebuild the relationship and develop trust.

While obviously, the primary responsibility lies with the person who had an affair to "come clean" and honestly answer your questions, you also have a responsibility to ask for answers in a way that increases the chances of getting the honesty you want. Your efforts to get answers may be made in such an understandably emotional way (with anger, criticism, etc.), that it dooms the effort before it starts.

Naturally, after discovering an affair, the strong emotions often take over and dictate your words and actions. And while you may know you need to better control your emotions in order to get your partner to communicate, you may feel you deserve to be free to vent your anger and that it's unfair for you to have to be careful in how you speak. You may also tend to feel that it's "making it easy" for your partner and/or "letting them off the hook" if you avoid venting your anger. So you may not be sure you really *want* to change.

But there are some very good reasons to want to change, and focusing on them may make it easier to do. For instance, speaking in a more calm, rational way is actually "in your OWN best interest." It's not so much that you "should" change; it's just that it's "smart" to change—in order to get what you want. (Most hurt spouses really want their spouse to actually "hear" and "understand" their pain.)

So let's take a look at what usually happens:

-- If you vent your anger, your spouse doesn't hear you because they're too busy feeling defensive and perhaps even sorry for themselves that they have to deal with the outburst. (This means they're focusing on THEMSELVES and how they're being attacked—and are not focusing on YOU and how you feel.)

-- If you speak calmly and rationally, your spouse may be able to "hear" you and feel compassion for you rather than irritation. (This means they may then be able to focus on YOU and the impact of their behavior on you.) Of course, there's no guarantee, but repeatedly making this effort has a far greater chance of success.

I acknowledge that it may be unfair for you to try to speak calmly, but it's the smart way to take care of yourself and to get what you want. Since your goal is to be heard and understood, you may want to change your way of talking in order to reach that goal. Doing otherwise means you're sabotaging yourself and your own best interests.

Also, communicating calmly doesn't mean pretending you don't have these strong feelings. You can still acknowledge the feelings, by simply stating that you have them and "describing" them—without "acting them out." (It's important that your partner understand that these feelings are still there, and to appreciate that you're working hard not to be controlled by them in order to be able to talk through this situation.)

Another tool for being able to talk in a way that gives you the best chance of being heard is to use a concept called T.A. (Transactional Analysis). T.A. is based on the idea that everyone has three different aspects of their personality on which they can draw for communication. In most business settings, the style is one of problem-solving, which is represented by the "Adult" part of our personality. This is generally based on making clear, rational statements. We all also have a "Child" part that is based on our emotions, as well as a "Parent" part that is based on the critical/judgmental part of our personality.

People are generally able to better hear communication that is expressed in "Adult" terms. So even when dealing with emotional or judgmental issues like affairs, we can still draw on our "Adult" problem-solving part to communicate about them—rather than talking in either an emotional "Child" or critical "Parent" style. (This doesn't mean denying the "child" or "parent" aspects; just that they are filtered through the "adult" in communicating effectively.)

To help get better understanding of (and control of) the emotions that stand in the way of good communication, see these Articles posted on the website: "Getting Control of Anger and Other Emotions" and "Using T.A. in Dealing with Affairs."

Most people do want answers to their questions—and they absolutely deserve to get answers. Also, there's a direct correlation between the degree to which you get answers and the degree to which you are able to rebuild the marriage. To check out the statistics on this point, please see the results of my Survey on Affairs posted on the website.

Also, check out the following articles that posted on the website that deal with this issue: "Is it reasonable to want to talk about affairs?" and "The Need to Know." (Especially note the section in this one about the importance of "Reinforcing the Honesty." This can best be achieved by practicing the kinds of ideas described above.)

## Getting answers to my questions?

### Question #1:

*It has been 21 months since I found out about my wife's affair. She would not tell me who, I had to find that out on my own. The first few months she has answered my questions, but it is still difficult to discuss. I find myself holding back because she feels we have covered that enough and wants to move on. At times I find myself totally devastated by the things she must have said and done. How can I get beyond that?*

### Question #2:

*For men facing the painful effect of their spouses affair. The issue of wanting to know the sexual detail seems most prominent. Should he ask for those details or should that area not be explored due to the additional extreme pain that could result? How much detail is too much detail for healthy recovery. Should you ask how many times, in what positions, did he make you orgasm, did he satisfy you more, did he use a condom, was he bigger & questions like these?*

### Peggy's Response:

I recently responded to a Question from a woman describing her husband's resistance to talking about his affair, and now this one is about men wanting answers about their wives' affair. It's important to note that the difficulty in talking about their affairs is the same for either men or women. Both genders behave in a very similar way in resisting answering questions and talking through the whole experience—for as long as it takes.

Before addressing the more general issue of "answering questions," let me comment on the specific concern in Question #2 above—wanting to know "sexual details."

It's understandable that there's more concern about answering these kinds of questions...and it's true that the answers can/will be hurtful, especially immediately. But the hurt of "not knowing" can be even more painful—and more long-lasting.

*In general*, it's the *willingness* to answer whatever questions the spouse wants to know that is critical in establishing a more honest relationship that allows trust to be rebuilt. Once this "willingness" to answer *any* details (including sexual ones), is established, it may minimize the felt-need to keep asking such details. (Again, in general, it's the "hurt spouse" who needs to determine the amount that is told. No spouse should be forced to hear anything they don't want to hear. But they have the right to get answers to whatever questions they ask.)

Here is a very brief excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth* about why answering questions is so essential to rebuilding trust:

If the person who had an affair is willing to answer questions about what happened, this can go a long way toward rebuilding trust. We've seen how difficult this is for most people to do; but unanswered questions become a barrier, making certain a couple will never be as close as they'd like. Many people feel they can never trust their mate again if their mate refuses to answer their questions. 'How can I trust that they will be honest in the future if they won't be honest about the past?' This was a significant part of my ability to trust James after he told me about his affairs. In fact, his honesty provided a basis for my trust that hadn't existed before. His willingness to answer all my questions caused me to trust him more than I had trusted him before the affairs ever happened.

(end of excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*)

Finally, I want to share some excellent points (a kind of guide) in encouraging the spouse who has had an affair to be willing to answer questions. Note that this was contributed by one someone who gave me permission to share it in hopes it would be helpful to others.

One woman's experience during the time of "talking and asking questions:"

I remember at one point we were lying in bed (where I felt safest to talk) and I was talking to him about what had happened; then I asked, "It won't be long before you're sick of all my questions, will it?" (I'd hoped he'd take me in his arms and reassure me - again.)

Instead he replied, "I already am!" I was so hurt and felt my newly-reassembled world was beginning to unravel. Angrily I said, "Well just how long do you think it will take me to get over this!!"

He said, "You've changed the question, first you asked if I'd get sick of your questions and I told you I already am. Now you're asking me how long I think it'll take for you to overcome my betrayal. My answer to that, is - I don't think you'll live long enough to ever truly recover from what I've done to you and to us."

In his mind, it was over. It had been over a long time for him, he'd realized long ago he didn't love 'her' and had told her so, (even though it continued after that). Therefore he didn't question his decision or his reason to return.

However in my mind it was still new and recent - hence my need for constant reassurance and to find "all the pieces of the puzzle."

I wish I could say from then on he found it easy/easier to answer my questions, but the truth is he didn't. I also learned when I needed to talk I could make it more comfortable for him by pre-empting my questions by saying, "I need to talk - not to make you feel guilty or punish you. I don't need you to "fix" me, I don't need you to apologize again, I just need to let my feelings out and to feel heard and hopefully understood." This seemed to take the pressure off him and he was more relaxed when I needed to talk.

(end of personal sharing by person who wrote)

To read my lengthy article about this issue, permanently posted on the site titled: "The Need to Know." Also, see the Article titled: "Is it reasonable to want to talk about the affair?"

## How can I talk to him when he only gets angry?

### Question #1:

*I was in counseling for 18 months, and my husband and I started counseling a few months ago, but I really don't see that it's doing much good, although the person we're seeing is wonderful!! The therapist did state that my husband is a very complex and private man; talk about hitting the nail on the head!!! I do hesitate to bring up the issues anymore because of the way he reacts; it isn't worth the anxiety. When I bring up "the issues," he turns into Mr. Hyde. We have made absolutely no progress. We haven't been intimate in 11 months. He hasn't said he loves me on his own, without me saying it first to him in almost two years. Over the last nine months I've all but given up. I am truly at the end of my rope. Should I just "hang in there" a little while longer??*

### Question #2:

*When I have confronted my husband with the proof he is having an emotional affair with his co-worker, he neither says he is or he isn't; he instead gets mad. I have never seen this reaction addressed and I don't know what to make of it or what my next step should be. His being mad has always worked in his favor as it frightens me and causes me to back down. The status quo is maintained. He continues his actions and I continue keeping quiet while the knot in my stomach gets bigger.*

### Peggy's Response:

I'm using the above two questions together this week to focus specifically on the issue of how people who don't want to talk or deal with their affairs just "get mad" when you bring them up. Whether consciously or unconsciously, the angry response is almost always aimed at simply "shutting you up" by whatever means necessary, hoping to finally extinguish your efforts to talk about it. (And from the description of the impact on those who want to talk, it's pretty effective.)

While I can't know enough about the particular people involved (or the particular therapist described in Question #1 who is felt to be good)... this angry reaction is unlikely to be because someone is a "very complex and private man," and highly likely to be simply that it's an effective tactic to avoid responsibly dealing with the natural consequences of their behavior.

Also, a claim of "privacy" has no merit—because an unwillingness to talk has to do with "secrecy," not privacy. Privacy relates to an individual's thoughts or actions that "are nobody else's business." But it's impossible to make a legitimate claim that an affair is not also the "business" of the spouse who is hurt by the affair. A refusal to talk is simply an effort to keep the information secret.

As I have repeatedly written (including reporting on the results of my survey on affairs), answering questions and completely talking through the whole situation is strongly correlated with both personal recovery and rebuilding the marriage. Of course, this knowledge doesn't help the spouse who wants to talk, but at least they can know that they are being perfectly reasonable to want to talk about this until it is fully dealt with—and that the angry reactions to their efforts are just a way of avoiding responsibility.

Of course, you can't "force" someone to talk who is unwilling to do so; which naturally leads to the question above: "Should I just 'hang in there' a little while longer??" It's normally unwise to "give up" without having spent a lot of time and effort seeing if it can be worked out (because people inevitably "second-guess" their decision if it's made in haste)... but once you *have* worked long and hard to rebuild, without success, then a decision to "give up" may not carry the same kind of regret or second guessing. However, *no one* should try to answer that for another

person—because different people might be faced with the same general dilemma... but (based on their individual wants, needs, hopes, priorities, etc.) may make different decisions—and in each case the decision may be right for that particular person.

Generally, as long as there is some kind of progress (however small), many people will "hang in;" but that usually changes at the point that there is not only no more progress, but things seem to be getting worse. And, as I said, no one can make that decision for someone else. It's the kind of decision that can best be made in concert with ongoing professional help in sorting through all the factors.

To go back to the initial discussion about the person who had an affair just "getting mad" when you try to talk about the affair...

As long as anger is being used to avoid dealing with this issue, it is blocking any reasonable progress that might otherwise be made. So the focus needs to be on talking about (and dealing with) the anger itself. And it's reasonable to ask a responsible counselor to focus attention specifically and directly on the anger in order to facilitate moving forward.

P.S. If anyone is *not* working with a counselor and is trying to do this alone, it's even more difficult. But the best effort to make is to talk in a way that defuses some of the emotions. And one of the best tools in talking in an effective way (that may possibly help reduce the angry emotional reaction) is Transactional Analysis (T.A.) You can read a very brief overview of T.A. principles in an Article on my website titled "Using T.A. in Dealing with Affairs." (And do note the reference at the bottom of the that page to an excellent book that can provide more information on using T.A.)

Finally, here are a few general guidelines as to "how to talk" that may help reduce the intensity of an angry response (since it avoids providing an emotional atmosphere, leaving them to generate *all* the emotion with nothing to play off of):

- Words:** try to avoid using "Loaded" Words (helping both parties talk with less emotion)
- Tone of voice:** try to stay calm, even, without emotion
- Body language:** relaxed posture, level eye contact, thoughtful/confident demeanor

I recognize this approach does not match the strong feelings and emotions that you have about this issue (and I also recognize that it's "unfair" for you to try to be careful in how you talk) but it's simply the "smart" thing to do. You're not trying to "make it easy" on your spouse; you're just trying to succeed in getting what you want—which is for them to be willing to talk rather than just reacting with anger.

## What about questions I really can't answer?

*Question:*

*I understand that in order for my spouse to heal from my affair, I must be supportive by answering his questions, but what if he asks questions that I don't have answers to? For instance, he asked me this question: "Why is it that before we got married, you had morals regarding only dating and having sex with one person but you lost your morals when it came to have this affair?" There are plenty of questions regarding the details of the affair that I can answer, but when it comes to logical explanations for my actions, I am at a loss.*

Peggy's Response:

This question from a wife who had an affair points to a legitimate problem that often arises with the general guideline to "answer all questions." As explained above, sometimes there really IS no answer—because a person honestly doesn't know what they were thinking or why they behaved in the way they did.

For the spouse asking questions, it's important to recognize the difference between "withholding answers" and their simply not being an honest answer that can be provided. For instance, the person who had an affair should be willing and able to answer any question regarding details and specifics: who, what, when, where type questions. But questions like "What were you thinking?" or "What were you feeling? Or "Why did you think or do a certain thing?" may not be answerable—because the person who had an affair simply doesn't know the reason. (And, of course, no answer would be "acceptable" anyway because there's never a "legitimate" reason.)

Affairs are seldom based on any kind of rational thinking; they're based on emotional reactions to situations. Few people consciously *decide* to have an affair or decide exactly what to do or how to do it. They can't look back and explain what they were thinking or feeling at the time they were having the affair—because most of the time they weren't clear about their thinking or their feelings even when it was happening. So being able to explain it after time has passed is virtually impossible.

If this kind of questioning is pushed and pursued too strongly, it's likely to lead to the person who had an affair trying to come up with some kind of answer just to have a response. But it won't necessarily have anything to do with the truth—because, as explained, they typically don't know what they were thinking or feeling at the time. They were being "carried along" by the excitement of the moment. They were rationalizing their actions. And they were *not* thinking clearly. (It's been said that having an affair represents "temporary insanity," and in a way that's true in that nobody who was thinking clearly would be likely to have affairs. Affairs are pursued from a basis of emotional impulse, not rational thinking.)

So while it's still critical that the person who had an affair be *willing* to answer all questions, it's also essential that the spouse recognize the difference between being "unwilling" and being "unable" to answer certain questions. It's usually not that difficult to tell when someone is genuinely trying to respond honestly, so it's better to focus on the degree of willingness to make the effort than on the specific answers that are given.

This whole issue of "answering questions" may be the single biggest issue that I have heard about through the years—and I've written a lot about it in the past, both in my books and in previous questions. I encourage you to review a couple of the Articles on the website that deal with this issue: "The Need to Know" and "Is it reasonable to want to talk about the affair?"

## How much time should we spend talking?

### Question:

*It has been 3 1/2 months since my husband disclosed his affair of 3 1/2 yrs. Marital recovery is going well. My personal recovery has a long way to go. The problem is when we discuss the affair he claims it is my discussion of it that causes him to remember her. I have asked him how much he thinks of her and if he is still in withdrawal. We discuss the affair approximately 4 days a week, usually for an hour. Is this too much time to be talking about it?*

### Peggy's Response:

As I've pointed out in the past, it's important to get answers to your questions (if you want answers) and it's important to be able to talk through the whole situation—a process that normally takes a couple of years. So after only a few months, there's an understandable desire to do a lot of talking.

However, this question about how much time to talk is very important. It's not the total amount of time that makes a difference; it's the time spent in any given session. Unfortunately, there's a tendency to talk less often than is most useful and to talk longer at any one session than is useful. By useful, I mean talking that serves to "move the process along." Here are some tips/guidelines that can make a difference.

First of all, ideally you would not set aside a specific schedule for talking—but would ask questions or bring up thoughts any time they occur. The reason for this is that if you wait and hold on to things you want to say, they often build up to the point that you can't say them in an effective way. However, if scheduling times to talk is the only way you feel you can do it, that's much better than not talking at all.

Nevertheless, it's good to set up some general groundrules or understandings about the talking. First of all, talking more often and for shorter periods of time is far preferable. For instance, talking any time you want to want to, but 30 minutes or less at any one time. The dread of a possible marathon talking session understandably creates resistance on the part of the one who had an affair.

Also, marathons have a way of being destructive to the process. Going beyond a half-hour usually leads to emotions getting out of control and/or both of you repeating yourselves over and over, etc. At the point you recognize that you're not going to make progress—whether it's after 3 minutes or 30 minutes—it's important to stop so you at least don't dig yourselves into a hole and set back the process. (You can feel "in your gut" the point at which it's futile to continue the conversation.)

In stopping the discussion at the point that it's no longer productive, it's important to also agree upon a time to try again—without waiting too long. This stop-and-resume process may be repeated many times, but eventually you reach the point of being better able to talk in a way that allows you to continue.

By the way, the goal is not to get to the point where you never talk about it; the goal is to get to where you can talk about it—but without the pain.) This happens when the talking is done for the purpose of gaining some understanding of what happened, considering what can be learned from it, and determining how to proceed in the future.

For more perspective on all aspects of "talking about the affair," I encourage you to read (or re-read) some of the articles already permanently posted on the site, including:

The Need to Know  
Talking about Affairs  
Overview of Survey Report

(Note: The "Overview of Survey Report" is an eBook: *Help for Therapists and their Clients in Dealing with Affairs*, in which I provide statistical evidence of the strong correlation between "answering questions and talking through the entire situation" with both "personally recovering" and "rebuilding the marriage.")

## Do you regret knowing?

*Question:*

*Do you regret knowing about your spouse's affair?" It seems to me sometimes my life would sure be simpler if I didn't know about my husband's affair. Of course, tho, I'm glad I know.*

Peggy's Response:

It's not unusual for a person to wonder if they would have been better off never knowing about the affair. I understand this way of thinking; I still wish it had never happened to me. But since it did happen, I don't wish I'd never found out about it. My strength and vitality as a person comes from knowing what's going on in my world, not from pretending that what I don't know won't hurt me. That attitude only robs a person of the right to lead their life based on the facts instead of on pretense. It's important to believe you're a person worthy of honesty and to insist on a relationship that reflects that worth.

On the one hand, there may be an emotional desire to *not* know (which really means wishing it hadn't happened in the first place). At the same time, there may be a rational understanding that it's better to know. It's just that once an affair takes place, neither alternative feels very satisfying.

Ironically, there's sometimes the feeling that if an affair is never known/discovered, then no harm is done. However, when a secret of this magnitude stands between a couple, it creates an "emotional distance" that makes the relationship vulnerable to all kinds of *other* problems. So a relationship will certainly be diminished to some degree by keeping an affair secret, and it may even eventually end—not due to the affairs per se, but due to the isolation and sense of "not really knowing each other" that grows out of maintaining this kind of distance.

## What if you're not sure you want the answers?

*Question:*

*You have said that the spouse who had the affair should answer any and all questions. And although I have a lot of questions I don't ask because I am not sure I want to know the answer. I have a lot of questions that pop up later as new things are learned. It has been almost 6 months since I found out about the 5-month affair. He is willing to answer any questions, but I wonder if I am prolonging the hurt by continuing to ask questions.*

*Peggy's Response:*

First, it's positive when someone is willing to answer questions, since all too often, there is a strong resistance. This does not, however, mean that you "should" ask anything you aren't prepared to have answered. Each person needs to decide for themselves the timing of when/what/how much they want to know.

Although most people want answers, that doesn't fit for everyone, so there's no reason to force yourself to ask anything you aren't prepared to face. In other words, it's completely up to the person in the place of the writer of this question to determine what they want to know and when they want to know it.

However, even when answers are not desired right now, it's wise to let the spouse know that you reserve the right to ask at a later time—since there's no way to know whether or when the feelings might change. In the above situation, it's been 6 months since finding out. And since it typically takes much longer than that to process this upheaval in your life, it's likely that the feelings about asking questions may change at some point in the future—so it's best for both people to be prepared for that possibility while not "forcing" anything now.

Below is an excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth* where I talk about a situation where there is a "suspicion" of an affair. (This same general principle applies regarding asking questions—just substituting the idea of "asking questions" for "confronting suspicions of an affair.")

### *Do You Really Want to Know?*

*A person needs to be sure they really want to know before asking if their partner is having an affair. One of the biggest drawbacks to being ready to confront the suspicions is feeling unprepared to face it if the suspicions turn out to be true. One woman said, 'I'm so afraid to ask about it, for fear I'll hear the worst. I try to block it out of my mind because I guess I just can't face the reality of the situation.'*

So, as the above excerpt points out, it's wise not to ask until you really want to know. Also, if/when you do ask questions and get answers, the key to whether or not there is a continuation of getting answers depends in large part on how you react. While it may not seem "fair," the one who asks has a responsibility to hear the answers in a way that doesn't punish the partner for doing what they've asked them to do. (This is not a matter of it being "wrong" to punish the partner; it's simply not "smart" to immediately punish someone for being honest, despite the potential pain from the honesty, because it means the honesty will be unlikely to continue.)

So this is further evidence of why it's wise to only ask questions when you are prepared to have the process continue. Frankly, for most people, once they start asking, it's difficult to stop. So it's important to start out with an understanding of and commitment to doing this in a way that can be truly productive.

Finally, re: the concern expressed in the last sentence of this question:  
*"I wonder if I am prolonging the hurt by continuing to ask questions."*

While this concern is understandable, getting over the hurt is a prolonged process—regardless of whether or not you ask questions. It's not as if NOT talking about it will make it go away. It simply gets buried, but it's usually "buried alive" and will just keep coming back until it's dealt with. So there is no realistic way to avoid the pain; it's more a matter of finding your own personal pace in dealing with it.

**Footnote: Critical crisis situations beyond the scope of these responses...**

While almost everyone who writes is in crisis and is seeking help, I occasionally receive questions that require immediate personal, professional help. For instance, sometimes people seem to be literally "holding on by a thread." While almost everyone feels desperate and alone when they discover a partner's affair (and even have thoughts of suicide), this is usually just an understandable desire to "disappear," not literally to "die." However, it's impossible to determine that from an anonymous email—plus, this is a totally inadequate forum in which to address such a dire situation.

So I strongly urge anyone who feels suicidal to see a crisis counselor and/or physician for the help you need and deserve. For others who simply wish there were a way to "escape" all this, see the article on the website titled: "Desperate Feelings."

## TRUST AND FORGIVENESS

### How do I "let go" and trust?

*Question:*

*A year has passed, and things have changed for the better, yet I find myself still unable to "let go" and trust. How do I get past this once and for all?*

Peggy's Response:

Neither "getting past the affairs" nor "trusting again" can be done quickly. And while a year may seem like plenty of time, I have repeatedly pointed out that I don't know anyone who has completely recovered in less than two years. And since personal recovery from the emotional impact of this experience is necessary in order to let go and trust, it's understandable that someone wouldn't be "past this once and for all."

Of course, time alone is not the only factor in getting past a partner's affair. For instance, most people don't get past an affair unless/until it is fully dealt with. This involves an ongoing process, including severing contact with the third party (or parties), getting answers to whatever questions are asked, and talking through the whole situation.

As for "trusting again," trust is not a decision (so it can't be "bestowed"). Trust comes as a byproduct of behavior that is trustworthy (so it must be "earned"). This behavior includes establishing a new history of ongoing honest communication about everything relevant to the relationship. This is why it is a long process that takes time; there are no short-cuts.

Naturally, it's easy to get discouraged when it takes longer than either person wants it to take. But simply understanding the nature of the process can help in dealing with the frustration that it doesn't happen more quickly. And as long as both people are committed to the ongoing work as discussed above, they can finally reach the point of letting go, getting past the affairs and trusting again.

## **How can I trust without thinking about the affair?**

*Question:*

*How can you trust again without thinking about the affair?*

**Peggy's Response:**

This brief question focuses on two of the critical issues resulting from an affair: the difficulty in trusting again—and the problem of continuing to think about the affair. First of all "thinking about the affair" is not directly related to whether or not someone ever trusts again. It's not as if trusting per se triggers thoughts of the affair; those thoughts are usually triggered by a multitude of things.

Since it's unrealistic to think (short of a lobotomy) that it's possible to just "not think about the affair," 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.

While diminishing the emotional control of the affair can help in rebuilding trust, it's also true that rebuilding trust can help to diminish the painful emotions. Of course, this doesn't mean simply making a decision to bestow trust; that would just be "blind trust." Genuine trust develops over time as a by-product of behavior that is trustworthy.

So while the partner is earning back some trust, the person in the position of the letter-writer is making an effort to gain control of their emotional reactions to the whole situation. Both these efforts (building trust and dealing with the emotions when thinking of the affair) take time and work. But with patience and commitment on the part of both people, they can eventually recover from the impact of this experience.

## How can I believe him again?

*Question:*

*Would you please address the honesty issue. I am amazed at what a good and believable liar my husband was during his affair. I came to him many times while he was having an affair, in tears and asked him about it, and he would respond sincerely by saying that he loved me and I could trust him, etc. I can even understand this to a point, but then he would turn around and meet her again and have sex with her. How can I believe his words again, I now know how well he can lie?*

*Peggy's Response:*

Obviously, rebuilding trust is an important part of dealing with and recovering from a spouse's affair. However, it's unreasonable (impossible) to simply make a decision to trust a person's words, especially in light of having experienced so many lies in the past.

Genuine trust can only be developed as a by-product of behavior that is trustworthy. This takes a lot of time and work, and simply can't be rushed. (You can't just "bestow" trust; that would just be "blind trust"—not backed-up by behavior.)

One reason it takes time to rebuild trust is because it takes time for people to change well-ingrained "habits." And for many people, lying about their affair has become a habit that must be broken. (As I've repeatedly pointed out, the typical attitude among people having affairs is: "Never tell. If questioned, deny it. If caught, say as little as possible.")

When a person is having affairs, it usually feels "safer" to lie than to tell the truth; but once they commit to rebuilding the trust that has been broken, they need to see that it's now both safer and smarter to tell the truth.

Some key factors in rebuilding trust include: answering your questions, hanging in through the inevitable emotional impact, and severing contact with the third party. (These usually indicate an effort to earn back some of the trust that has been broken.)

Actually, part of the reason a person lies to their spouse about their affair is that they have usually first lied to themselves. They have rationalized their behavior and told themselves whatever was required in order to deal with the gap between who they were and who they pretended to be.

To further illustrate this last point, here's an excerpt from our book, *Beyond Affairs*, where James describes this rationalization process:

"An important part of maintaining my image of myself as an OK person entailed not looking at the world from Peggy's point of view. That would have been too painful. My avoidance of that perspective for seven years was so complete that I was really convinced my actions had not been that hurtful to her. When she told me how much anxiety and pain she had experienced, I said I was sorry, but I wasn't really aware of the depth of her feelings. I had been avoiding facing them for too long to really see them. The old 'what she doesn't know can't hurt her' philosophy was the cornerstone of my belief system. While I was having affairs, I was convinced it was true. I am amazed at my ability to rationalize my actions and compartmentalize my values so I didn't have any internal conflict with what I was doing."

(end of excerpt from *Beyond Affairs*)

## Should I believe and trust him?

*Question:*

*Two years ago I found out my husband had an affair. I had a lot of questions and he answered me. Last week I found out from him that he made up all those answers in order for me to stop asking him. Now he's telling a different story. I'm confused and I don't know if I should believe and trust him.*

Peggy's Response:

After all the secrecy (and lying) that usually goes with having an affair, very few people tell the whole truth when initially beginning to answer their spouse's questions. Information usually comes out very slowly and gradually. (I've described getting answers as being like the process of peeling an onion, one layer at a time.) The fact is that very few people who learn of their partner's affairs ever learn absolutely everything.

What usually happens is that a person tells as little as possible, only what they feel they absolutely have to tell and nothing more. This is understandable in that nobody (on any issue) wants to voluntarily disclose things that they know will create bad reactions; it's normal human survival. Of course, there are also other reasons for not telling the truth (or for not telling all of the truth), including feelings of guilt or shame, protecting their partner's feelings, trying to avoid the inevitable emotional upheaval, and avoiding dealing with the consequences.

But generally, when someone voluntarily shares more information a couple of years later, it's more likely to be true (or truer) than the original information. And in fact, the reason stated above as to why he "made up" the earlier answers ("in order for me to stop asking him") is plausible. Most of the time, the main goal of the person who has had an affair is to avoid talking about it, so they may say anything they think will end the discussion.

However, this doesn't mean the new information can automatically be trusted. It can't just be accepted at face value, but requires much more discussion about this new "different story" to get a sense of whether it is, in fact, true.

So while the confusion is completely understandable, this is an opportunity to explore the whole "truth-telling" process, looking toward establishing a basis for ongoing honesty in the future. And determining the trustworthiness of what is now being said will depend on this kind of ongoing honesty, not on one instance of "correcting" past false information.

## How can I ever trust him again?

*Question:*

*My husband never admitted to the affair until I had proof from his emails and contacted his lover for confirmation and specific details he could not deny. Only then did he admit the affair and the lies. How can I ever trust him again, and how do I stop myself from checking his emails behind his back?*

*Peggy's Response:*

Rebuilding trust is difficult for everyone whose spouse has had an affair—regardless of the degree of difficulty in getting them to acknowledge the affair in the first place. Unfortunately, it's very common for people to go to great lengths to avoid detection. Here's the way I described it in my book, *The Monogamy Myth*.

*Never tell. If questioned, deny it. If caught, say as little as possible.*

This is the basic code of secrecy among those having affairs. They don't stop to question why this is the accepted motto; it just is. It may come partly from a natural human drive toward survival and self-protection. It's understandable that they don't want to be discovered and have to deal with the consequences, so most people will go to great lengths to deny it and to avoid any efforts to discuss the subject of affairs.

So the fact that he didn't admit the affair until there was proof does not necessarily determine how he will react once he does finally admit it. The degree to which trust can be rebuilt depends more on what happens at this point than on what happened before the admission. As for "how to stop checking his emails behind his back," it's understandable to want verification of his actions. But it's likely to be more effective to simply acknowledge the lack of trust at this time and insist on being privy to all his email correspondence. And if there is a denial of this request, then it's reasonable to openly acknowledge that you will be checking up on him. Since you have every right to check up on his emails, there's no need to "go behind his back" to do so. It's preferable to model honesty when you're asking for honesty rather than resorting to deception—when his original deception is what caused this problem in the first place. The bottom line is that it takes a long time to rebuild trust and it takes the active effort of both parties.

## What if it happens again?

*Question:*

*I am recovering from my spouse's affair. We are trying to work things out, go to therapy, etc. In your own situation, Peggy, how do you know that your husband will never do this again? Or do you? Are you prepared if he does have another affair? Because I found out 7 months ago and I am still devastated and don't know if I can ever trust him again.*

*Peggy's Response:*

Since this particular question asks me a personal question about my own experience, I chose it to address at this time because of the timing of the 30th anniversary of the day James told me about his affairs: January 31, 1974.

Here's what I wrote about that day in the Introduction to *The Monogamy Myth*:

The day my husband told me about his affairs has become very important for us, in many ways more important than our wedding anniversary. While it was a day that turned my world upside down, it's one that we still celebrate today, after all these years. It's not the day itself we're celebrating; rather, it was the honesty that began that day. It resulted in our making a commitment to be honest about all important issues affecting our relationship. When I think how far we've come, I know there's hope for others in gaining a new understanding of affairs—and surviving them.

Now...to respond to the questions raised in this week's question:

"How do you know that your husband will never do this again? Or do you? Are you prepared if he does have another affair?"

Actually, I addressed these question in *Beyond Affairs* and in *The Monogamy Myth*.

Here's an excerpt from *Beyond Affairs*:

*I've been asked, "How can you ever trust him again?" What I trust is his honesty—that he will never deceive me again. If he were promising specific things he would or wouldn't do, I couldn't trust that. Nobody knows absolutely what they will or will not ever do. But he's promised me honesty.*

*The real key to trusting this honesty is that he doesn't just say it—he practices it. He never hesitates to answer any question I ask him...about anything. He doesn't try to avoid issues that he thinks might upset me. He's willing to "eyeball" me on any subject I want to discuss. The hours and hours he spent answering my questions about affairs earned him my trust in his honesty and helped me overcome my pain.*

And here's an excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*:

*Monogamy doesn't depend on a one-time decision, whether it's made at the beginning of a relationship or following an affair. Even if a person intends to be monogamous when they make that commitment, it doesn't mean they won't change their thinking at some future time. When there's only a promise of monogamy, there's no way to determine when a person's thinking is changing and they are moving toward the possibility of an affair.*

*If there's no security in a promise of monogamy, this still leaves the problem of finding a way to overcome the fears and doubts that most people feel after dealing with a partner's affair.*

*(It's important to note that trust is likely to be a problem not only if the marriage continues, but also in any new relationship that develops in the future.)*

*The way to rebuild trust is not by making a promise of monogamy, but by making a commitment to honesty. There's a tendency to think of honesty only as telling something that was previously kept secret. But the main power of honesty is in sharing feelings. When a couple share their deepest feelings about everything, including the "scary" stuff (like attractions to other people or fears of their partner having an affair), they develop a deeper understanding of each other. Many people think that talking about such emotional issues will inevitably cause problems. But it's far more likely that it will lead to a closer relationship because of the comfort involved in feeling you will be told the truth about anything that comes up.*

As for the question: "Are you prepared if he does have another affair?"

Here's how I wrote about my initial thinking (within the first couple of years after learning about the affairs) in our 1980 book, *Beyond Affairs*.

I'd probably choose for us not to live together. That doesn't mean I'd want to end the relationship. I've thought carefully about that, and it's clear I want James to be part of my life all my life. But I would not want to be in the typical, live-in wife role.

At this point, after 30 years of honesty (and monogamy), it's highly unlikely that he would have another affair. But I don't think anyone can ever really be "prepared" if it actually happens again. However, with a true commitment to honesty (and to investing the time and effort in honest communication), you can tremendously reduce the chances of ever having to face this problem again.

In fact, whether or not it might happen again depends in large part on how it is dealt with the first time. If it's set aside, not discussed and dealt with, and not recognized as a life-long area requiring honest communication—then people continue to be more vulnerable. But if they answer all questions and talk through all the issues surrounding the affair, then commit to ongoing honesty—it's highly unlikely to happen again.

Footnote on my personal sharing:

Obviously (based on how much of my personal experience I share on my website and in my books), I'm open to sharing anything about my own experience—in the knowledge that it helps others to hear from someone who has "been there." The following message is typical of the kind of reinforcement I get for my personal sharing:

"I have done a tremendous amount of reading and want you to know that you are my favorite author. First, because you experienced this yourself and are so honest about how you and your husband dealt with that life-changing event. Most authors give only a cursory (if any at all) recognition."

Back in 1980 when we wrote *Beyond Affairs*, detailing our own personal story, I received a huge outpouring from people who identified with my experience—which is what led me to continue this work through all these years.

## Steps to restoring trust?

*Question:*

*I am trying to remain in an 18-year marriage with three children. I am seeking practical, specific activities that are foundational to rebuilding trust. The "just do it" direction I have received is not working for me. Can you share how the annihilated bond of trust can be restored in a marriage?*

Peggy's Response:

Learning to trust again takes a lot of time and work—most of which must be done by the person who *had* an affair. (There's not much the spouse can do to restore the bond of trust. It was broken by the one who had the affair, and can only be restored by the actions of the one who had the affair.)

Actually, I've written quite a lot about the issue of trust over the years. That's because it's such a key issue for everyone after learning of their spouse's affair. In responding to the above request for some "practical, specific activities to rebuild trust..." I'm listing below some of the steps to be taken by the person who had an affair in order to gradually rebuild the trust that has been destroyed

Here are some specific guidelines for the person who had an affair:

### **1. Don't expect your spouse to trust you again for a very long time.**

While your spouse may want to trust again, trust cannot be "bestowed;" it will only come as a by-product of your willingness to do everything possible to gain their trust. While your commitments and promises are a good starting point, it's your actions (over time) that will dictate the course of rebuilding trust. "Actions speak louder than words."

### **2. Sever all contact with the third party.**

This means no more contact of any kind: no telephone, email, nothing! (The only exception to this is if the third party is a family member or there is a child born from the affair. In those cases, most people try to accommodate to some kind of contact in the future.) For any other situation, it's a matter of being clear about the priority—to help your spouse recover—which may involve major life changes. For instance, an affair at work means finding another job. An affair with someone in your social group means changing friends. An affair with someone within your very small community means moving to another community. An affair through the internet means no computer at all for awhile, then only limited use with *no* private email accounts and no chat rooms, etc. The bottom line is to do whatever it takes to sever all contact with the third party.

Note: If the third party initiates contact, tell them your spouse knows about the affair and that you will have no more contact with them. Clearly ask them to honor this request. Even though you may feel bad to hurt the third party this way, it's just a fact that everyone gets hurt in these situations and your first responsibility is to bring no more pain to your spouse. (Also, it's better for the third party to know where things stand so they can get on with their life without dragging this out or holding out false hope.)

### **3. Answer all of your spouse's questions.**

Most spouses want lots of information, not only who, what, when, where, why—but details too. Your natural inclination (both to protect yourself and to "protect" them) will be to only tell whatever you think you absolutely have to disclose, but no more. This is like trying to put a band aid on a major wound. Your spouse's life has just been turned upside down, and they need

answers in order to make any sense of it. But more important than the answers themselves, they need to know you are willing to do whatever it takes for them to recover. It's up to your spouse—not to you—to determine what they need to know.

As important as it is to answer the questions, it's usually even more important that you are willing to keep answering for as long as they need to ask. It's this "willingness" that demonstrates a degree of responsibility that is critical to your spouse being able to trust again.

#### **4. Hang in through the very, very, very long process of talking through the whole situation.**

Patience will be one of your greatest tools in getting through this process. As I've frequently written, I've never seen anyone completely recover from the emotional impact of this experience in less than 2 years—when both people are doing everything to try to recover. Efforts to deny it or bury it or just "move on" are doomed until your spouse feels he/she has been heard, has gotten answers, and has taken the time to recover and heal.

#### **5. Respect your spouse's need to talk with others about this life-altering experience.**

It's understandable to want to keep this hidden from others. It may be embarrassing, awkward, and elicit criticism, but those are just some of the inevitable natural consequences of this experience. To expect to be protected from any consequences simply adds insult to the tremendous injury felt by your spouse. (Frankly, anything that feels too awful to talk about often feels too awful to get over. So it's important that your spouse not be isolated and alone as he/she struggles to deal with this devastating experience.)

#### **6. Be willing to "report in" as to your whereabouts.**

You can help the process of rebuilding trust if you honor any of your spouse's needs for contact or to know your whereabouts. For instance, they may want you to call them at certain times or need you to provide a schedule that give them some reassurance of your actions.

Rebelling against their need for you to "report in" won't make the need go away. In fact, the more you resist, the more they're likely to feel that their concerns about your trustworthiness are valid. But the more cooperative you are in earning back their trust (including calling as often as necessary), the less time it will take. You see, the more you demonstrate your willingness to take responsibility for doing whatever they need to feel reassured, the less they are likely to feel anxious, thus the less they are likely to need this constant calling. Please understand, however, that even when the need for you to constantly call diminishes, there is likely to still be some lingering anxiety, uncertainty, and need for reassurance for quite a long time.

If you do everything possible to reassure your spouse for a couple of years and they still insist on your calling with every move you make, then that may indicate a different problem: either an underlying need to "punish" or an inability to recover, no matter what you do. But do recognize that for about the first 6 months following discovery, a person struggling to recover from their spouse's affair is fortunate if they can just eat, sleep and function. They don't need to have to deal with your resistance to calling in the midst of such overwhelming destruction of their sense of trust and security in their lives as a whole.

#### **7. Go to counseling with your spouse if they wish to get professional help.**

This is not their issue to deal with; it's your joint issue to work through together. The very process of coming together to work through all this not only demonstrates your commitment, but also provides the possibility of facing this crisis together in such a way that allows you to develop more honesty and closeness in the future. For a list of counselors/therapists who have been

recommended as being effective in dealing with affairs, see the list posted on my website for "Locating a Therapist" near you.

Note: The above points are by no means complete, but they're a good beginning. And pursuing this path is sure to lead to more understanding of what else is involved. But mainly, this kind of information can't be "spoon-fed" in lists or superficial coverage. So I encourage those who have had an affair to read everything on my website, beginning with the Articles on Affairs. Also, most of the information posted on the site is based on the concepts more fully covered in my book, *The Monogamy Myth*.

### **Important Footnote about Trust**

We tend to think that the trust issue is "resolved" whenever there's a divorce following an affair. However, our ability to trust anyone has been undermined unless and until we deal with the emotional impact of the affair. The degree to which a person recovers and is able to trust again does not necessarily depend on whether or not they stay married. It depends on getting more understanding of the whole issue. This involves doing a lot of hard work (usually involving reading, talking, reflecting on it)—either with or without the person who had the affair.

Second, it's not just a question of not trusting the spouse (even a new spouse); it's also a question of not trusting your own instincts. This is understandable due to the experience of having been deceived in the past. Once someone finds out after years of being deceived, there's a tendency to feel foolish at having been trusting and to feel afraid of having that happen again.

While we do need to "learn from our experiences," the lesson to be learned from this experience is not that you can never trust again. It's that you need a different kind of trust: one that is based on an ongoing commitment to honest communication—not the old kind of trust based on assumption. We can't just assume monogamy (even though, based on the wedding vows, we think we should be able to assume it). We need to recognize the prevalence of affairs and establish the kind of honesty in the relationship that builds real trust.

Remember that trust is not something you bestow on someone. Trust is a by-product of maintaining the kind of close connection (and real knowing of each other) that comes from responsible honesty.

## Should my husband travel to see his friends after his affairs?

### Question:

*Only a few weeks ago I found out my husband has been having affairs with 2 other women over the last 4 years. We are currently on a waiting list for therapy. To process what has happened I've talked to some close friends about what he did. Now my husband also wants to see his friends, but that means traveling abroad. Since the travel was the excuse for his affairs so far, I'm not supportive of this. However, he makes an effort to do all the other things to rebuild trust. Should I let him go?*

### Peggy's Response:

First, it's good that this couple is planning to receive counseling. And it's good that he is "making an effort to do all the other things to rebuild trust." While waiting for counseling and while doing other things to rebuild trust... it's important that they work *together* to begin dealing with the ramifications of the affairs. Separation (for any reason) is not a smart step, and certainly not traveling to "see friends."

While it's usually helpful for the one who had an affair to talk to *someone* (like a counselor or other nearby person who is a "friend of the marriage"), there is no legitimate reason for traveling to "see his friends." Even if there is no ulterior motive in the trip related to having affairs, it's likely that the desire to go is based on escaping/avoiding having to deal with the inevitable fallout from the affair. (Most people will do almost anything to avoid having to answer questions and talk through what they have done.)

The need to "talk to friends" is very different for the one who had affairs vs. the spouse who has just learned of the affairs. It's important for the person who has learned of a spouse's affair to be able to share with friends about this situation because the devastation they feel is often helped by being able to talk about it rather than keeping it secret. (When it's seen as "too awful to talk about" it may feel "too awful to get over.")

However, it's not likely to be useful for the person who had an affair to do the same kind of "talking to friends." They're better off talking to some objective person like a counselor or to someone who is a friend of *both* people in the marriage, not just personal friends. (This is especially true if the friends knew about the affair or perhaps even helped in keeping it secret.)

Also, since this letter indicates that "traveling was the excuse for the affairs," there should be no non-essential travel for quite some time. And even if some work-related travel is needed, it would be wise for the spouse to accompany him on the trip if at all possible.

So while it's good that the person who had affairs is making an effort to do all the other things to rebuild trust, "not traveling" needs to be added to the list of things. Even with the best effort in all areas, rebuilding trust is a very slow process. So it's important to consistently do everything that helps move in this direction—and specifically avoid things like traveling that would be a setback to rebuilding trust.

## How can I forgive him?

*Question:*

*It has been 18 months since I discovered my husband's eight year on-again-off-again affair with a co-worker. Since my discovery, he has been completely remorseful and has become the husband I always wanted. My problem is that I cannot stop thinking about all the lies and betrayals. I would like to forgive him and move on but I just can't bring myself to do that. How can I forgive him without being completely healed from the hurt caused by his betrayal?*

*Peggy's Response:*

When the person who had an affair does not step up and take responsibility—which includes not only "showing remorse," but also severing contact with the third party, answering questions, hanging in through the long recovery, etc., then there's no need to worry about "forgiveness." However, sometimes (as described above), even when the person does everything you might expect to deal with all this, it may still be difficult to reach the point of feeling forgiving.

One part of that difficulty may lie in the wording of one of the phrases in this question: "I would like to forgive him and move on..." When someone feels that "forgiving" means you are then required to "move on" (which usually implies no longer talking about it and being "over it"), that's an entirely different set of problems. So the first step is to recognize that just because you reach a point of forgiveness doesn't mean you forfeit your right to continue to complete the long and difficult process of dealing with all this.

In the particular case described in this letter, it has been 18 months since discovery of the affair. And (as I have repeated ad nauseum), I've never seen anyone completely recover from the emotional impact of a partner's affair and be ready to "move on" in less than two years.

Also, the whole idea of "moving on" does not mean never discussing it again or never having any further difficulties in dealing with it. An experience this significant is not going to be erased from your mind, no matter how much time has passed. So the goal is not to get to the point where you never think about it or talk about it, but to reach a point where you can think about and talk about it—without the pain.

Another common misconception about forgiveness (that may make it seem even more difficult) is the tendency to think that forgiving your partner "as a person who made a huge mistake" is the same as "forgiving what they did" or somehow implying "it's OK now." You can forgive the person without specifically forgiving the actions—which means that over time you need to strive to put these actions in the context of who they are as a total person.

These painful actions do not erase everything else about the person that may still be viewed as positive. But all too often we filter the whole identity of a person through this one experience, forgetting or ignoring everything else that goes into making them the person they are. So an effort to recall other more positive characteristics of the person may help in being able to forgive. (This is especially true if the marriage ends, so you don't go through life with the kind of internal burden that comes from carrying a load of negativity about the former spouse.)

Another distinction that might be helpful is to realize (as stated above in saying "I'd like to forgive him") that this is the first step to forgiveness—the desire to forgive or the intention to forgive. So it may be that simply taking more time while also trying to bring some balance to your view of your spouse as a total person may allow your desire to forgive to finally become a reality.

Finally, I've only skimmed the surface of the complexities surrounding the whole issue of forgiveness. Frankly, it's not nearly as "black and white" as we have typically assumed. If you would like to get a great deal more understanding of this issue, I recommend a book by Janis Abrahms Spring titled: *How Can I forgive You? The Courage To Forgive, The Freedom Not To*.

To encourage you to check out this book, here is a brief excerpt from an interview with the author that explains more about how you can recover—either with or without forgiving:

*"There are two approaches for responding to a personal injury:*

- *Acceptance: a healing response for the self, accomplished by the self, that's not forgiveness but a way of coming to terms with the injury and making peace with the past.*
- *Genuine forgiveness: the second approach, takes place between two people and asks as much from the offender as it does from the hurt party.*

*You can heal yourself and clear your head of emotional sludge—resentment, rage, hurt and shame—with or without forgiving."*

## How can we "forgive" each other?

*Question:*

*It has been three months since I found out. We seem to be caught in a loop where I need her to forgive me for my attitude which led to the affair before I can completely forgive her for the affair. What can we do?*

Peggy's Response:

It's understandable that people want "forgiveness" for whatever they have done that has been hurtful to their partner. But a situation like the one described above sounds like it's more about "control" and "blame" than about "forgiveness."

Forgiveness is not something you "bestow" on the other person; it is something that is earned based on *future* behavior. Also, forgiveness is not an "event;" it emerges out of the "process" of working to understand *all* the factors involved. Working toward forgiveness involves considering the affair in terms of the larger perspective—beyond *just* personal faults or failures.

Any "forgiveness" without having fully addressed the whole situation is usually an empty forgiveness. Only when people gain information, understanding, and perspective (so they can overcome the shame and blame of seeing affairs *only* as personal failures) are they prepared to overcome the anger or depression—and truly "forgive." (Three months, as mentioned above, is *way* too soon to have gotten beyond the initial emotional impact in order to gain good understanding and perspective of this whole issue.)

While it's important to accept personal responsibility for your actions—as long as an affair continues to be seen *only* in personal terms (as something one person causes the other to do—or something one person does to another), true forgiveness is unlikely. Also, by overcoming the tendency to view this issue strictly in terms of assigning *blame* (requiring forgiveness), it becomes easier to deal with the next major challenge for those who decide to stay in the marriage—to feel loving and giving again.

## SEXUAL ISSUES

### Sex after the affair?

*Question:*

*My wife had an affair and we've reconciled it to some extent, but things have been subtly different sexually. Her responses, sensations and preferences are not the same. I can't help but feel she's drawing directly on her memories of the affair—and to that extent I am turned off if not repulsed. How do we get back on track?*

Peggy's Response:

A common problem for many couples is the feeling that their sex life has been irreparably damaged due to the impact of the outside sexual activity. Since the past experiences can't be changed (and potential memories from these experiences can't be deleted), the only reasonable path is to create new memories together that will gradually replace the old ones. I call this effort one of "reclaiming whatever was lost."

I can personally relate to this issue because it was one that I experienced first-hand. Here's the way I described it in *The Monogamy Myth*:

"For instance, since oral sex was the central feature of one of the affairs my husband had (before it became a regular part of our sex life), it would have been easy to feel that this was now ruined for us, that this would forever be a reminder of the affair. Instead of letting that happen, we deliberately focused on it as part of our lovemaking, thereby "owning" it for ourselves. So instead of shying away from it or avoiding it because of the other association, we diluted the importance of the other experience and made it eventually fade away by replacing it with our own."

It's also important to recognize that most of the memories of sex in an affair have to do with the novelty or newness of the experience—which is extremely superficial and doesn't hold up well over time. This is because most of the memories from affairs are more like "fantasies" than "real" memories. In fact, really good sex has little to do with this kind of fantasy sex. Far more significant are the more "natural" contributors to good sex (like honesty, communication, and a lot of loving touch) which can be the cornerstones of the effort to create and sustain excitement in a sexual relationship. In fact, *honesty* can provide a sense of newness and surprise that can't be matched by an "affair" or by any of the standard gimmicks for improving a couple's sex life.

## How can I stop thinking about the other woman during sex?

*Question:*

*My husband and I are recovering from his long term affair which he claims was sexual and not emotional. Now when we make love, although I enjoy it, I keep envisioning him being as passionate with the other woman. Is it possible he had sex without passion with other woman? Why can't I stop associating his actions with me as things he may have done with/to the other woman?*

*Peggy's Response:*

The feelings described above are extremely common, especially in the beginning when a person is trying to deal with all this new information. There's no "quick fix" to overcome it; it takes time. But it's possible to use this experience as a catalyst to re-thinking the nature of your sexual relationship with your spouse—and make it even better. This is what happened in my own situation, and in that of others who have written me.

Here are some excerpts from *The Monogamy Myth* that describe my own experience in dealing with this problem:

*"In the months following the night I learned about his affairs, I felt a lingering sense of sadness that the specialness of our sex was now gone. Sometimes I would feel so subdued that I would be unable to let go and get in touch with my sexual feelings. But even during those times when I wasn't able to bring a great deal of enthusiasm to the sex act, I continued to engage in sex because I wanted to overcome these feelings of distance and continue to build the relationship. At other times, I would become fully aroused and completely enjoy our lovemaking, only to be lying in his arms afterward and have a sinking feeling just sweep over me as I thought about some other woman lying in his arms like that.*

*Many women have shared similar frustrations at their fluctuating sexual feelings after their husband's affair. The intensity of these feelings and the length of time they persist depend to a great extent on what else is happening in the relationship, specifically the degree of trust and honesty that has been developed. My own period of sexual adjustment following James' affairs was much shorter because of the trust I had that he was not continuing to have affairs after that night when he told me about them.*

Honesty can lead to a level of trust that can have the wonderful byproduct of making a couple's sex life far richer and more exciting than it ever was before. This is a very important feature of honesty (one that many people overlook)—that it creates excitement in a relationship, especially in the area of sex. A couple can feel safe enough to be completely vulnerable with all their desires, fears, and insecurities.”

Regarding passion:

“...the primary way to create and sustain excitement in a sexual relationship is through honesty. It provides a sense of newness and surprise that can't be matched by any of the standard gimmicks for improving a couple's sex life.”

Regarding reclaiming whatever was lost:

“A common problem for many couples is the feeling that certain acts or experiences may be so closely related to the affairs that they seem to be ruined for the primary sexual relationship. But this doesn't have to be the case. For instance, instead of shying away from it or avoiding it

because of the other association, you can dilute the importance of the other experience and make it eventually fade away by replacing it with your own."

So the initial impact of affairs on a couple's sex life doesn't necessarily indicate the final results. It all depends on what happens during this healing process and how open they can be about what they want and need. Sometimes the sexual relationship can become even better than it was before. Unfortunately, some people use this fact as a rationalization to justify an affair—that it provides some benefit to the marriage. It's clear that James' affairs didn't help our sex life. Our sex life improved because of the work we did to overcome the affairs and the honesty we developed in working through the pain and misunderstandings."

(end of excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*)

### Is it normal to desire him after being so hurt?

*Question:*

*I have been married fifteen years to my high school sweetheart and found out one month ago that he had two affairs over the last three years and was in the process of starting another one when I discovered it. He is extremely remorseful and wants to save our marriage as do I. We have been talking more openly than ever and feel closer despite my extreme pain. We also have been making love frequently—is this normal? I feel so guilty that I could desire a man who has hurt me so deeply.*

*Peggy's Response:*

Learning of a mate's affair almost always has a significant impact on the sex life of the couple—but not *necessarily* a negative effect. In fact, my own experience was similar to the situation described in the above question. Here's how I described my own reaction in our book, *Beyond Affairs*:

"We had started talking about 9:30 p.m. We finally quit at 2:00 a.m. Much to my surprise, we made love. I would have expected it to take quite awhile for me to feel loving toward him."

Through the years I've heard reports of all kinds of reactions, which I discussed in *The Monogamy Myth*. For instances, sometimes the discovery of an affair brings a temporary halt to a couple's sex life. They may even continue to share the same bed, but avoid sexual contact. Others avoid sleeping in the same bed—or the same room. And still others report an intolerance of even being touched by the partner who had an affair. These situations may last for only one night or they may continue for several weeks or months. (And, of course, some couples never resume a normal sex life, eventually separating or getting a divorce.)

One man described how his wife's affair made her more exciting to him sexually (as long as he focused on her strictly as a sex object), but less acceptable to him as a wife (because he no longer respected her). But it's not just men who may develop an increased sexual interest in their mate following the discovery of an affair. Women also reported their surprise and confusion at feeling very excited sexually and finding sex with their mate better than ever after finding out about their mate's affair.

This can be a very strange experience, since it's happening at the same time they may feel anger, hurt, and uncertainty about the future. However, this is not as strange as it may seem. Sex becomes highlighted in the course of focusing on an affair. Because of the attention to sexual behavior, there's a tendency to think in terms of sexual roles instead of the other roles that may normally be more dominant. This may lead to seeing a partner in a sexier light, causing them to seem more desirable. And since sex is the subject of such intense focus at this time, it can stimulate unexpected arousal.

So the experience described in this Question is not as strange or mysterious as it may seem.

## How can I help my husband deal with his guilt?

*Question:*

*My husband's guilt over his affair is possibly going to destroy any chances of repairing and rebuilding our marriage. It has been two years and he still feels shame and embarrassment around me. My husband's shame prevents him from feeling comfortable regaining our intimacy, but until intimacy is restored I doubt his love for me. How can I help him through this?*

**Peggy's Response:**

This question was submitted several times in different forms, but one particular aspect (regaining intimacy) seemed to be especially compelling. So I want to address the significance of dealing with this aspect as a key to dealing with the guilt—and rebuilding the marriage.

While at first glance it appears that the husband's guilt must be overcome in order to repair the marriage, it may well be that the guilt can't be effectively addressed directly—but can be affected by addressing the need to re-establish intimacy. The feelings of guilt are unlikely to just "go away" one day, freeing him to feel comfortable with intimacy. But by gradually increasing the intimacy, the increased feeling of connection and closeness may allow the guilt feelings to recede.

In this situation, I'm assuming that the word intimacy is being used as shorthand for sexual relations in the marriage. So let's deal directly with that issue. It's not a matter of suddenly having sex after a two-year period of abstaining. Any good sex therapist will gently guide a couple through a gradual process of touching, massaging, etc., that (after a period of time) evolves into sexual activity.

This process should have been begun two years ago, but "better late than never." This situation is a classic case where the longer you wait, the more difficult it becomes—because it's now become an even larger problem by virtue of creating a barrier to the general closeness that can flow from more physical closeness.

So the bottom line is that taking steps to increase the intimacy can be the first step to diminishing the focus on feelings of guilt. As the closeness and connection grows, the guilt feelings will be much easier to deal with.

## How and when will I feel passion and loving feelings again?

*Question:*

*I receive many letters related to this issue—so I'm posting 3 of them before my response.*

*Letter #1*

*He's been back for 2 years and is sincere, but passion hasn't returned yet. He refuses counseling and hates to talk about it, which I have respected, except every now and then I initiate a conversation. How can I get him to talk so we can become better friends, a precursor to lovers?*

*Letter #2*

*Please describe any pattern observed: to become lovers again, how long does it take, how can it be facilitated? Is there a pattern of so many years generally after he leaves other woman to return?*

*Letter #3*

*What is the approximate length of time one can expect loving feelings to return after the discovery of a 5 year affair? He had done everything in his power to come back home (cards, flowers, re-negotiating, making dinner, therapy, church, begging.....) The flame wasn't burning too bright even when all this came out but now it doesn't even seem to be lit and wonder if it's salvageable.*

**Peggy's Response:**

While an affair often leads to a closing-in/protective feeling that interferes with experiencing loving feelings, recovering those feelings can be even more difficult if "the flame wasn't burning too bright..." before. Here's an excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth* where I talk about this:

I'd be remiss if I didn't say a little more about the importance of another aspect of love that tends to get forgotten in the midst of this time of hurt and alienation. That is the real, honest-to-goodness physical attraction, the chemistry, that presumably once existed. If, before this crisis period, a person's heart "fluttered" and they felt "turned on" simply by seeing their mate again after a brief absence, then they have a much better chance of recovering from this experience. If this "spark" was already gone, the effort to recover the deeper loving feelings may be an overwhelming task.

Despite the difficulty of "lighting the flame" after an affair, there are some things that can make a difference. For instance, simply waiting for the loving feelings to return is probably a hopeless exercise. Just as with a real fire, the embers eventually fade out and die unless there is some action to revive them: blowing on them, stirring them up, adding something to them, etc.

The same is true for the embers of love. It's essential to deliberately take some action to revive the embers. This does not mean resorting to some kind of "sexy tricks or gimmicks;" that's far too superficial for something so significant. Here's an excerpt from *Making Love Stay* that reflects on this:

Are you frustrated by the endless stream of suggestions for magically improving your love life—like having sex in strange places or going to motels with no luggage? Are you tired of trying all the gimmicks and tricks that make you feel foolish or embarrassed—like saran-wrap surprises, wearing no underwear, or talking dirty on the phone? We have been continually frustrated by the simplistic techniques offered in many books and the superficial views about love propagated by the media. Love is far too serious and significant in our lives to be given such short shrift.

It's important to realize that it's not a matter of recovering the kind of loving feels that might have existed prior to the affair. This is now a whole new relationship 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."

Clearly, "giving up and moving on" should be the last resort—after taking actions that can lead to more closeness. All too often we think of love *only* as a "feeling," but there's strong evidence that love can also be a "decision." So part of the hope for recovering the loving feelings is deciding to do so. This doesn't mean you can "force" the feelings—but it does mean that you decide to be open to them and take the kind of actions that will "let them come in."

If both people genuinely want to increase their intimacy, they can do it—not by sitting around waiting to "magically" begin feeling close again—but by doing things that can lead to that kind of closeness. Love doesn't come and go capriciously. Since loving feelings are often a byproduct of loving/caring behavior, there are many, many little things that people can do every single day (small loving acts of caring) that can make all the difference in the world.

## Where's the passion?

### Question:

*Since learning of my husband's affair, I find myself wanting the "excitement" like he had with the other woman...which is no longer there with me. I have really worked at trying to add spice, change, surprises...but I find it is a one way street. When I try to approach the subject, he remains silent. He listens...but never comments. He seems happy and committed...so this is probably a stumbling block on my road to recovery.*

### Peggy's Response:

Much of the "excitement" of an affair is due to the very nature of it being secretive and "forbidden." This automatically makes sex in an affair seem "different" from real-life "legitimate" sex in marriage. But the sexual relationship in an affair is not "real" in that it has more to do with acting out a fantasy than with anything about real feelings between real people. While it's understandably frustrating to feel you can't "compete" with the "excitement" in an affair, that excitement is very superficial and inevitably fades with time (unless a person goes from one affair to another, constantly keeping the excitement that *only* comes from "newness"). So an affair is not a useful sexual standard by which to gauge marital sex.

It's critical to understand that even though marital sex may *seem* less "exciting," it is *not* less desirable; it's just different. It has its own unique form of intensity and excitement, both of which emerge from a deeper connection between you and your partner. Eventually, in the best relationships, the best sex is based on the pleasure of full openness to another person without anxiety, uncertainty, or fear. In fact, feeling fully open and connected to another person (in life in general and in sex in particular) can result in a better sexual relationship than is possible in the momentary excitement from the novelty of sex with someone new.

The best sex does not come from "working on it" or "talking about it;" it comes from feeling free to be totally open to each other so that you really *know* each other as each of you shares your hopes, fears, desires, goals. Forging a deep connection based on full honesty with each other and vulnerability to each other allows the sexual feeling to naturally flow as a byproduct of that closeness. This process of constantly learning more about each other (as each person grows and changes) provides a sense of "newness" that can allow your sex life to be better than any superficial connection with someone else. So the best way to enjoy life-long "exciting" sex is *not* from tricks, "spice," or gimmicks, but from really "knowing" each other on a deep level so you feel free to let the natural sexual feeling flow.

## How can I get past the painful images of them together?

*Question:*

*How do you deal with the images that just come to your head day and night of your spouse having sexual intercourse with the other person; I find this extremely painful and I just can't get those images out of my head. What do I do?*

*Peggy's Response:*

Almost everyone whose partner has had an affair can identify with this problem. I know from my own experience how difficult it was to deal with the image of James having sex with other women. It felt especially disturbing because we had both been virgins when we became sexually involved with each other—so I had no image of his ever having had sex with anyone else, even prior to our marriage. In some ways it felt like our very special relationship was now ruined.

But the love was still there—so we simply set about the long and difficult task of integrating this new reality into the history of our relationship. And we also set about working to create a new (and better) relationship than we'd had before—including sexually. Our new commitment to complete honesty created a level of closeness and a sense of freedom that allowed us to develop our sexual relationship beyond what we would have thought possible.

It's definitely better when a couple can continue/maintain their sex life while trying to deal with an affair. When they suspend their sex life, the "images" can be even more powerful because there is nothing to offset them. The sooner a couple builds new memories of their own sex life, the sooner the images of sex with the other person can begin to recede. Of course, this still takes quite a bit of time, as does everything about recovering from a partner's affair.

Here are some other thoughts about dealing with potential barriers to enjoying sex after an affair. The following is excerpted from *The Monogamy Myth*:

*Couples often find that thoughts of the affair interfere with their ability to enjoy sex. The intensity of the emotional feelings about a partner's affair can block a person's sexual feelings. When they are dominated by feelings of anger and resentment, their bodies are in a state of tension that causes stress to the total system. Regardless of the basis of the stress, it tends to suppress sexual feelings.*

*The tension-related emotions associated with the pain of a partner's affair are usually restrictive, whereas those associated with sexual feelings are expansive. This creates a contradiction of feelings, usually blocking sexual expression. Since it takes time to overcome the negative feelings, one way to keep them from totally blocking any positive feelings is to try to transfer some of the emotional intensity from the negative feelings into sexual intensity.*

*Since women have judged themselves so much in terms of their sexual desirability...a woman may "shut down" her feelings as a way of dealing with her pain. It may take time for her to regain her sexual confidence. It may take quite awhile...to be able to engage in sex without feeling the presence of this "other person" as a barrier between them and their spouse. So patience can be an important key to getting through this period. It's especially important for the person who had an affair to be understanding and accepting of the time needed to adjust to what has happened.*

(end of excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*)

## What about STDs?

*Question:*

*Did you ever comment about what happens when the spouse finds out she has an STD that she got from her husband having affairs? I would like your input on this.*

Peggy's Response:

First, a little background before proceeding with information about STDs (sexually transmitted diseases).

I received this question from a woman I had known for awhile, and responded to it personally. She then wrote back with some excellent information of which I had been unaware—to which I responded that I would share our communication with all of you in order that more people can be better informed about STDs as they relate to extramarital affairs.

Here's a copy of the personal response I sent to the above question:

I just quickly re-checked (to confirm my thinking) that I have *not* directly addressed this issue. That doesn't mean it hasn't come up - because it happens more often than anyone might think, including sometimes being the way a woman finds out about her husband's affairs is when she discovers she has an STD.

Frankly, one of the reasons I've never tried to address STDs specifically is because (strange as it may seem) this has never been the specific focus for the people who have commented on it - because they're so overwhelmed by the totality of the life-altering ramifications of the affair that this is not the issue they ask about. (They seem to see this primarily as a physical issue to be addressed with their physician.)

However, to focus on it now... mainly, STDs have been seen by most women as simply "adding insult to injury." It fits under the overall question they have of: "How could he take the risk.... of getting caught... of hurting me.... of hurting the children.... of causing a divorce..., etc." (So STDs are just one more of the many things women wonder how he could have risked.)

As hard as it is to imagine, the fact is that men having affairs *usually* simply "don't think" about any of these possible consequences. There is a focus *only* on the positive feelings/experiences of the affair (excitement, novelty, ego-boost, etc.) while they block out, avoid, deny, or rationalize any possible consequences. In fact, in order to continue to think OK about themselves while continuing to have affairs, it's pretty essential that they block out any focus on the risks they're taking.

Certainly, this doesn't "justify" their failure to focus on the consequences; but it does help to simply understand men's ability to "compartmentalize" and avoid considering the potential for *any* consequences - including STDs.

Below is a copy of the excellent information she shared with me—which I now want to share with all of you.

*When I found out about my husband's affairs, I made him go for an HIV test, as well as going for one myself before I would continue to have a sexual relationship with him. I was reasonably certain that he had not contracted anything.*

*However, I just had a test for HPV, and it turned up positive for "high-risk" types. This puts an entirely new spin on our relationship. HPV has no cure, can be contracted even though*

*the man wears condoms, and is directly linked to genital warts, cervical and oral cancer. I am devastated all over again and am trying very hard to stay on an even keel.*

*This test is not routinely done by a gynecologist. It is only done upon the patient receiving an abnormal PAP test result...or if the patient specifically requests it. I just think that both women and men should be aware of this particular STD, and how easy it is for it to be transmitted. The results of having it are, indeed, quite serious—more than just "adding insult to injury."*

Regarding not turning men off, this is really not a gender issue. Women that have affairs can catch this virus even if they have "protected" sex, because the virus is found on the skin of the scrotum as well, and can attach itself to their genital area. They can then give this to their husbands. It works both ways. Unfortunately, I did not know about this issue or else I would not have waited to be tested for it until 3 years later. I am now breaking out with genital warts, which is what precipitated my email. I suppose had I known about it, and had found out right from the start, I can safely say I would not have tried to preserve my marriage. The feelings of betrayal coupled with the fact that I now run these health risks would have been cause to leave my marriage at that time.

*I am surprised that so little is written about this subject. It seems that the HPV virus is the one most commonly transferred from one person to another...even if they are having "protected" sex. I don't know that knowing this information would stop a person from cheating on their spouse, but it would certainly benefit people if they knew about this. I don't think it would have helped my situation, because my husband was sleeping with me as well as his girlfriends, and so I could have gotten the virus at any point.*

*This virus can stay in your system for many years without causing any symptoms whatsoever. Vaginal warts, when tested with a DNA test (which I had) that show that they may be of the "high-risk type" can cause cervical cancer at a later date. This virus stays in the system of the infected person until something causes it to be symptomatic.*

*If a person tests positive for viral types from the groups HPV 16/18/31/33/39/45/51/52/56/58/68 they are at high risk for contracting cervical cancer. After I realized that I had genital warts (vaginal) I had my doctor perform a DNA test. This is done by taking a sample of tissue from the cervix. My test came back positive for high-risk type.*

*He also said that when I found out about my husband's infidelity, and had an HIV test, I should have been re-tested at "regular" intervals for at least a year and a half. He said that if a person is also infected with HIV, their immune system is compromised, and that could be a reason for the HPV to cause warts, and later on cervical cancer. I was never advised of this, and because I am menopausal, have been having unprotected sex for the last 3 years. As you know, HIV is spread by contact with bodily fluids, so I now have this worry as well until I can get tested again.*

*Now you have to understand that just because you have HVP, does not mean that you will definitely get cervical cancer. It depends on your "viral load," that is how much of the virus you actually carry. He was not aware of how one gets tested for that, but he said that women with high-risk HVP should have PAP tests at least twice a year to see if they get an abnormal reading—which would mean that they MAY have cervical cancer. The relationship of HVP to cervical cancer is this—most cases (over 97%) of cervical cancer have been found to be caused by HVP...not that all HVP causes cervical cancer. I hope you can understand the difference.*

*There is also something else. Although my husband had "protected sex" (i.e. used a condom for intercourse) he did have unprotected oral sex with this woman. According to what I have read, the lesions can also be transferred orally, and my gynecologist told me tonight that it can also be transferred manually. A wart is a wart. Some are more high-risk for cancer than others. There is information on some of the cancer websites that say that the incidence of oral cancer caused by genital warts has increased as well.*

*This has reached epidemic proportions. Most people consider it an annoyance if they have the "low-risk" type of warts. However, if you are exposed to high-risk HPV (which, incidentally, I was) it is much more than an inconvenience.*

*There is no cure for this. So even though a person may not be at risk for cervical cancer, the prospect of multiple genital warts is not pleasant.*

A comment sent in by another visitor to the website offered the following comment:

I'd like to point out the fact that getting one type of HPV does not prevent one from contracting other types that are carried by other sexual partners.

I continue to learn from my readers, am grateful for all this information. While knowing this information is not likely to stop a person from having an affair, it is worthwhile simply for the awareness of the spouse. For instance, I was aware of HPV as one of the many STDs but did not have the kind of gender-neutral details described above. I mistakenly assumed that most STD issues were about male-to-female transmission - partly because every person I have heard from who got an STD from their spouse's affair was a wife getting it from her husband.

So my experience had left me with a mindset that addressing STDs would be a gender-divisive issue to address. And since so many men come to my site for help and support in dealing with their wives' affairs, I'm sensitive to not turning them off. (Frankly, men whose wives have had affairs hurt just like women whose husbands have had affairs—and the men have even fewer sources of help since so much of what's written is addressed specifically to wives.) Anyway, I have now posted some of this information as a permanent part of my website.

There are many sites on the Internet with information on STDs. One site that provides information about 14 different STDs (including HPV) is "American Social Health Association." But the most important thing is to check with your own physician and pursue the necessary tests to determine whether you are at risk.

P.S. Shortly following the time the above Question was posted, the Parade Magazine section of my local newspaper contained an article titled "Do you know about HPV?" The concluding statement in the article was titled "Good News," saying: "*Researchers are working on several vaccines targeted at high-risk HPVs. One, ideally, may protect against both the most common cancer-causing forms and the main wart-causing strains.*" So it's good to see that this issue is receiving the attention it deserves.

## PREVENTING A RECURRENCE

### How can we prevent an affair from happening again?

*Question:*

*You talk a lot about the only way to prevent an affair from happening again is to be open and honest about monogamy in your marriage and to talk regularly about this as it is an ongoing concern throughout a marriage, but how specifically do you do that and how do you bring it up and how often?*

Peggy's Response:

For the sake of those who aren't familiar with what I've said about "preventing" affairs, I basically describe how prevention is possible only through a commitment to Honesty, not a "promise" to be monogamous."

This commitment involves having ongoing honest discussions of the issue - which means more than just "not lying;" it means "not withholding relevant information." This kind of commitment to "responsible honesty" makes it possible for a couple to feel they really know each other, making it more likely they can trust that they won't deceive each other, thus preventing affairs.

As far as the question above: "how specifically do you...bring it up and how often?" The issue of affairs is all around us. (In fact, it can't be avoided.) It's in the news, in movies, on TV, and happens among our friends, family, or acquaintances. So it's not a matter of how or when to "bring it up." You need only take advantage of the many times when the issue presents itself as a potential subject for discussion.

Most people actively *avoid* having in-depth discussions on an ongoing basis - because they have the false idea that it's too scary or risky. But the real risk is in *not* talking. It's only through talking (and specifically "not withholding" your thoughts about the subject) that you can gain some measure of reassurance that you know where things stand. Without this kind of sharing, you're left to wonder - with the inevitable anxiety that comes from this kind of uncertainty.

It's important to understand, however, that it's unrealistic to think there is some kind of absolute protection, some kind of actions that can "guarantee" you'll prevent an affair. There are no guarantees. The issue of monogamy is never settled once and for all. This is why it's so critical to have ongoing honest communication.

## What if it happens again?

### Question:

*When my husband admitted his affair five years ago, we managed to stay together after he promised it would never happen again. I thought it was "behind us." Now, he's had another affair, and I just don't know how I can go through this again—or whether to even try.*

### Peggy's Response:

It's definitely more difficult the "second time around." Anytime we survive a crisis, our greatest hope is to never have to face it again. However, (even though it's understandable that no one wants to hear this), monogamy is an issue that is never "settled once and for all."

By that I mean that no matter what someone does (taking marriage vows or renewing them, promising monogamy, counseling, etc.) there's no "guarantee." This is true in the very beginning of marriage as well as throughout. This is not meant to be discouraging. In fact, the false belief that there's some magic way to guarantee that it will never be an issue in the first place or never be an issue again after it's happened once—is part of the mindset that makes it *more* likely. We can never simply "set it aside" as if we've dealt with that once and for all and *know* we'll never have to deal with it again.

In fact, sometimes people who have been through this once tend to think that now that they've dealt with it, it's like being inoculated against a disease. But if it's set aside and not recognized as a life-long area requiring honest communication, then people continue to be more vulnerable. The best "preventative" for affairs is *honesty*. By that I mean, "responsible," rock-bottom honesty—meaning honesty undertaken specifically for the purpose of strengthening the relationship by staying in touch with each other's internal thoughts. The reason this is more helpful in preventing affairs than anything else is because no matter *why* someone might *want* to have affair, the critical ingredient essential to their actually *acting* on it—is a willingness to be *dishonest* and *deceptive*. So whether it's the first affair or a recurrence, a commitment to this kind of honesty and to continuing to appreciate that this issue doesn't just "go away" gives a couple the best chance of avoiding it in the future.

I certainly can't know the prospects for any particular couple in being able to work through this issue after a recurrence; I can only offer the perspective that it is "possible." It all depends on whether both parties commit to actively working on an ongoing basis to establish and maintain the kind of honesty that allows them to learn from this experience and build a stronger relationship in the future.

## Is it true that they'll cheat again?

*Question:*

*I have always heard, that once a cheat always a cheat. Is this more true than false?*

Peggy's Response:

Before addressing this question, I want to comment on the fact that I'm using the word "cheat" only because this is the word that was used in the question. However, those who have read any of my writing may notice that I never use the many "loaded" words typically used in discussing affairs—because they tend to trigger an emotional reaction, interfering with the ability to think more clearly, make more effective decisions, and recover from the emotional impact of this experience. That means I don't personally use the word "cheat,"—or other words common to this issue like: "infidelity, betrayed," etc.

However, regarding the question as to whether a person who has had an affair is likely to have another one in the future: Basically, once someone has had an affair—and it has been discovered/exposed—whether or not it might happen again in the future has very little to do with the facts of the first affair(s). Regardless of whether it was a one-night stand, a long-term affair, or multiple affairs, the primary factors that indicate whether or not it will happen again is what happens *after* the affair is known.

If the person who had the affair never really deals with it—meaning they don't take responsibility, don't sever contact with the third party, don't answer questions, don't talk through it, don't commit to ongoing honesty, don't hang in through the long process of rebuilding the marital connection—then it is *more* likely to happen again.

On the other hand, if the person who had the affair does take responsibility, severs contact with the third party, answers the spouse's questions, talks through it, commits to ongoing honesty, and hangs in through the long process of rebuilding the marital connection—then it is *less* likely to happen again.

Obviously, there are no "guarantees" that there will never be a repeat (just as there are no guarantees that a spouse won't have an affair in the first place). But the above guidelines are very strong indicators of whether or not it will happen.

So the bottom line is that whether there is a repeat in the future has almost nothing to do with what happened in the past—and has everything to do with what happens now and in the future.

## Will it happen again after he's been caught?

*Question:*

*My husband had an affair last year. I am still recovering. He is trying very hard to make up for what he did. Sometimes I wonder if he will try it again because now he knows what not to do so I won't suspect. What are the percentages (if they exist) of men having another affair after they have been caught the first time?*

*Peggy's Response:*

I have not seen any statistics that specifically address this issue. Very little about this whole situation is cut-and-dried—and statistics that would focus on this would have to be done on an extremely long-term basis in order to check as to whether or not there was EVER a repeat. Added to this problem is the difficulty of getting honest answers to these kinds of questions asked of people who have had affairs. So I'm not too hopeful about finding good statistics.

However, since I've stayed in touch with some couples for many years following an affair, I'll share my opinion based on the general patterns I've observed.

In general, when couples thoroughly talk through and work through the affair issues and commit to continuing their honest communication about all aspects of their relationship—then there is unlikely to be a repeat affair.

However, when couples do *not* talk through it and fully deal with (but try to bury it or set it aside and just go on), the pattern of secrecy continues and there's *more* likely to be a repeat.

So while it's possible that a person who had an affair now "knows what not to do so you won't suspect," you also now know what to do to make it less likely that they can deceive you—by continuously insisting on honest communication. The importance of this is that simply "not discussing" these kinds of issues makes it easier for someone to deceive you, but making them talk about these issues means they have to outright lie. This is not only more difficult for them to do, but it's easier for you to detect if there is an effort to be deceptive.

The bottom line is that everything depends on what happens once the affair has been discovered as to whether there is a repeat in the future. Ignoring it, setting it aside, not discussing it, etc., does not help in preventing a recurrence. While ongoing open discussion of all related issues doesn't "guarantee" it won't happen (since there's no such guarantee), it certainly offers the best hope for preventing a repeat of this painful situation.

## Will they have another affair?

*Question:*

*Statistically, what are the odds of a person engaging in another affair once the painful truth of past affairs has been revealed, and once the couple has agreed to seek counseling to work on their problems?*

Peggy's Response:

This is a question (and a concern) that comes up frequently. Even when it's unspoken, many people worry about whether or not someone can truly change. I have addressed this issue several times in the past, but since it is such a prevalent concern, I'll comment on it once again.

I have not seen any statistics that specifically focus on the chances for repeat affairs. In fact, statistics that would focus on this would have to be done on an extremely long-term basis in order to check as to whether or not there was *ever* a repeat. Added to this problem is the difficulty of getting honest answers to these kinds of questions asked of people who have had affairs. So I'm not too hopeful about finding good statistics.

But I can say from experience in hearing from so many people many years after-the-fact that there's a general pattern that can be observed. Basically, it depends on how the affair was dealt with the first time. In other words, the primary factors that indicate whether or not it will happen again are based on what happens *after* the affair is discovered or exposed. (This is true regardless of the nature of the affair: one-night stand, long-term affair, multiple affairs, etc.)

If the person who had the affair never really deals with it—meaning they refuse to talk about it, won't answer questions, don't take responsibility, don't talk through it, don't commit to ongoing honesty, don't hang in through the long process of rebuilding the marital connection—then it is **MORE** likely to happen again.

However, if they answer all questions and talk through all the issues surrounding the affair, then commit to ongoing honesty and hang in through the long process of rebuilding the marital connection—it's highly *unlikely* to happen again.

Obviously, there are no "guarantees" that there will never be a repeat (just as there are no guarantees that a spouse won't have an affair in the first place). But the above guidelines are very strong indicators of whether or not it will happen.

So the bottom line is that whether there is a repeat in the future has almost nothing to do with what happened in the past—and has everything to do with what happens now and in the future.

I really can't overstate the importance of ongoing honest communication. The importance of this is that simply "not discussing" these kinds of issues makes it easier for someone to deceive you, but talking about everything means they have to outright lie. This is not only more difficult for them to do, but it's easier for you to detect if there is an effort to be deceptive.

Here is an excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*:

*No one has a crystal ball to see just what the future holds, but there are indications that can serve as a guide.*

- 1. Is there a willingness to talk about what happened and to try to learn from it?*
- 2. Is there a willingness to use the information in a constructive way instead of using it as a way to punish past behavior?*

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

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

*5. 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.)*

*6. 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? Changes of this kind don't happen overnight, but unless there's an indication of movement in this direction, there's little hope for developing a good marriage.*

(end of excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*)

Also note an Article permanently posted on my website that deals with the issue of rebuilding trust titled "How can you ever rebuild trust after an affair?"

## Is it a "one-time" thing—or will it happen again?

### Question #1:

*I recently discovered my husband had a one night stand. What are the chances of this being a one-time thing, or would your research suggest that generally men do this on a serial basis. I have suspected him on several occasions, but with no hard evidence, except for the one time.*

### Question #2:

*When someone commits adultery, statistics show that they are very likely to do it again. How can you trust someone who has betrayed you once not to do it again?*

### Peggy's Response:

The above questions are somewhat different—but related. And I have addressed both of these issues before. Here are some key factors:

As I've said over and over (and one of the key points in my book, "The Monogamy Myth"), the absolute norm is: "Never tell. If questioned, deny it. If caught, say as little as possible."

This is almost universal. So even if/when someone is caught, they tell only what they absolutely have to tell—no more. This is totally understandable in that nobody (on any issue) wants to voluntarily disclose things that they know will create bad reactions; it's normal human survival.

The fact is that many people who learn of their partner's affairs don't learn everything. They're often afraid they don't know everything—but they're even more afraid of finding out there's more (and frankly, they often can't really imagine there's more—because they're still trying to think rationally and make this "make sense.")

As for statistics predicting whether or not it will happen again...

I have not seen any statistics that specifically address this issue. Very little about this whole situation is cut-and-dried—and statistics that would focus on this would have to be done on an extremely long-term basis in order to check as to whether or not there was ever a repeat. Added to this problem is the difficulty of getting honest answers to these kinds of questions asked of people who have had affairs. So I'm not too hopeful about finding good statistics.

However, since I've stayed in touch with some couples for many years following an affair, I'll share my opinion based on the general patterns I've observed.

In general, when couples thoroughly talk through and work through the affair issues and commit to continuing their honest communication about all aspects of their relationship—then there is unlikely to be a repeat affair.

However, when couples do not talk through it and fully deal with (but try to bury it or set it aside and just go on), the pattern of secrecy continues and there's more likely to be a repeat.

So while it's possible that a person who had an affair now "knows what not to do so you won't suspect," you also now know what to do to make it less likely that they can deceive you—by continuously insisting on honest communication. The importance of this is that simply "not discussing" these kinds of issues makes it easier for someone to deceive you, but making them talk about these issues means they have to outright lie. This is not only more difficult for them to do, but it's easier for you to detect if there is an effort to be deceptive.

The bottom line is that everything depends on what happens once the affair has been discovered as to whether there is a repeat in the future. Ignoring it, setting it aside, not discussing it, etc., does not help in preventing a recurrence. While ongoing open discussion of all related issues doesn't "guarantee" it won't happen (since there's no such guarantee), it certainly offers the best hope for preventing a repeat of this painful situation.

For some statistical information based on my survey on affairs related to the correlation between "talking" and "recovery and rebuilding the marriage," see the Overview of my "Survey: Help for Therapists" under the Therapists section of the website.

## 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."

## Progress in Breaking the Code of Secrecy?

*Question:*

*What's the most effective way to prevent affairs or to recover if you face a spouse's affair?*

Peggy's Response:

Obviously this is a huge question, and much of my writing addresses it, but I want to use this opportunity to discuss one of the key factors in both prevention and recovery: "breaking the code of secrecy"—to more effectively confront the whole issue of affairs.

The single most powerful support for affairs is the secrecy that surrounds them, and the single most powerful force for breaking that secrecy is having more open, honest discussion of the reality of the devastation felt by the people who suffer in silence. In fact, "keeping the secret" serves to increase the isolation, further compounding the pain. (As I've said many times: if it's seen as "too awful to talk about it," it often feels "too awful to get over.")

Here's an excerpt from my Article on the website titled *Breaking the Code of Secrecy*:

For many years I've struggled with the dilemma of how to help people recover from a spouse's affair while maintaining so much SECRECY about their experience. While I have scrupulously protected the privacy and confidentiality of all who have contacted me for help, I have nevertheless recognized that much of the difficulty in recovering is precisely due to the secrecy with which we all cooperate in maintaining—what I have called the Code of Secrecy.

As indicated above, I have always protected the privacy of the countless people who have turned to me for help during the past 25 years. But it is with great pride that I see some brave souls being willing to step up and "go public" with their experience—in order to inform and educate others about the reality of affairs.

My husband and I first spoke publicly about our own experience in 1980, and through the years others have spoken out as well. But much of the time the TV talk shows still look (for the sake of ratings) for the most "raw, emotional" cases to put on the air—often people who have no business going public. I describe this use/abuse of TV in an Article on my website titled "Extramarital Affairs and TV Talk Shows."

Nevertheless, there have been more and more people willing to speak out in a responsible format, which is slowly but surely making in "breaking the code of secrecy."