

Collection 3: Involved in or Affected by Affairs

151 Questions and Responses by Peggy Vaughan

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MARRIED AND HAVING AN AFFAIR

Help for those who had affairs?

Question #1:

I have seen plenty of resources for spouses who have been cheated on, but I can't find any resources for the cheating spouse. While the affair is behind us, I still have very dismal days thinking about the thrill that was. I love my wife, but I remain very confused. Please Help.

Question #2:

I have found many articles and material written about affairs, their effect, the devastation and recovery. This has helped me in my understanding of the situation. The problem I have is that I have found nothing concerning the recovery for the other woman (or man) that was involved with a married man. Her recovery is just as difficult, but I have found nothing in the ways of support to help her/him through this excruciating time. Do you know where to find non-judgmental support?

Peggy's Response:

I periodically receive questions like these asking why there is no help for the person who has had an affair. The above questions about recovery come from a married man who had an affair and from a (presumably) single woman who is trying to recover from an affair with a married man. (The above letters describe two different sets of relationships, not related to each other.)

Since I recognize that when it comes to affairs, "everyone winds up getting hurt," I'll review some of the perspective that can be helpful to those who have been involved in an affair.

In the first letter, the man says: "While the affair is behind us, I still have very dismal days thinking about the thrill that was."

It's helpful to clearly recognize that the affair situation is a fantasy that exists in a bubble. In fact, there's a certain "idealization" of the fantasy relationship (with something of a Romeo and Juliet quality) that makes the idea of giving up the affair feel all the more emotionally difficult. It's easy to get far more attached to this fantasy situation than anyone expects or wants to admit, becoming a pleasant habit that's hard to drop.

But dealing with the "loss" may be easier when clearly focusing on the fact that it wasn't nearly as "real" as it appeared—so the sense of loss is mostly of a fantasy, not of a real thing. In fact, it was doomed from the beginning in that it was almost guaranteed to end. (Unless an affair is discovered earlier, most affairs last from 6 months to 2 years, which is how long it usually takes for a bit of reality to set in.)

One reason to avoid focusing on the feelings of loss at ending the affair is to recognize that doing so serves to pollute whatever positive memories you might otherwise have about the experience. So it's in your own best interest to move forward with a clearer recognition that this was part of your past and doesn't have to color your future. You can re-enter the "real world" and simply hold the memories of the affairs as what they were, a fantasy that was bound to end.

Another way to address the confusion about your feelings for your wife is to actively focus on those feelings while deliberately avoiding dwelling on the past feelings for the other woman. In fact, this is a time when you can actually strengthen your feelings for your wife. But first, it's important to avoid making comparisons between your feelings for your wife and those for the other woman, remembering that the feelings for your wife are the real feelings of love while the feelings for the other woman were representative of what's typical in the "first stage" of a relationship. Those feelings simply don't last in any long-term relationship. For more on the "Changing Nature of Love," read the first chapter of *Making Love Stay* which is posted on the website under book descriptions in the Bookstore.

The second letter is from a single woman trying to find non-judgmental support for her own efforts to recover from the impact of the affair. Unfortunately, many people who become the third party *think* they're aware of the risks. But they're almost never prepared for the inevitable pain that comes when the affair ends—as it almost always does. *Very* rarely does an affair lead to divorce and marrying the affair-partner, so the single third party is almost always left "holding the bag" in the end.

When the end does come, it's smart to try to extricate yourself (both physically and emotionally), in the most effective way possible, which means doing it completely—with no dragging it out, which just prolongs the pain. So the sooner there is complete separation, the sooner you can get on with your life.

Quick and complete separation 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! That's not to say it won't be painful, but the pain is over more quickly than prolonging things with a slow withdrawal. (As an example, think of the difference in quickly removing a band-aid as compared to very slowly pulling it off, one hair at a time.)

As for how to have the strength to make a complete separation, it will be important to have someone to turn to for support and accountability in this effort (similar to the way there is someone to turn to in AA for contact and support in a moment of weakness). It's also helpful to specifically plan other activities (for your mind and your body) so you stay otherwise engaged. Finally, it's useful whenever you think of him (which you will do) to avoid letting yourself dwell on the thoughts or escalate the thoughts. (Like with meditation, just notice you're having the thoughts and then let them go; do not focus on them, obsess about them, etc.)

The "non-judgmental support" requested in the second letter above is what I'm trying to provide in that I'm not focusing on the right or wrong way of thinking, only on the "smart" way of thinking and behaving. For instance, it's smart to recognize that you deserve more than playing "stand-by" to someone else's life.

And instead of focusing on what you've lost, it's smart to deliberately focus on what you can gain in terms of pursuing other strengths/interests in life. Everyone faces some kind of crisis in their lives, and these crises are opportunities to grow stronger and smarter in living your life in a more conscious way.

Coping with my affair

Question:

I am a 35-year-old female. For the last few years I had been struggling with a marriage that never felt right. I was always the loyal wife and never even had many friends. As time went on, the problems in the marriage grew more intense. There was a great lack of communication, lack of respect which lead to abusive behavior on my husband's part (both physical and mental abuse took place). I felt like the loneliest person alive. Eventually, I made a friend. A person who lived in my same neighborhood. We began a friendship which ended up in an affair. The affair lasted 2 months. Eventually, it all came out in the open right after the affair had already ended. It all happened so fast that the person who I was involved with and I never really had a chance to properly discuss it. It was just an abrupt discontinuation of the affair.

My husband and I are still together and it has been a struggle. I have made no attempt to contact this other person and don't have any urges or intentions of doing so. My question is that this person still lives a few houses down with his family and we still live here. I wish I could relocate to another neighborhood but it is not possible at this point. The wife of this person has demonstrated behavior which seems to me to be obsessive. I understand her anger and if I could change what happened I would do so without a doubt. However, 6 months have passed and I make it a point to stay out of sight, but this woman has been stalking me, making hang-up calls and is constantly watching out for me. It got to the point that I had to involve the authorities. She calmed down for about a period of two weeks but has started up the behavior again. I am a person with a nursing background education and know how to recognize obsessive behavior.

I know I was wrong but how can I make her understand it is over. I feel like her behavior is getting out of hand and fear for my life. What's worse is that her behavior started at least one year before the affair ever took place. Back then, she didn't have a reason. Unfortunately, today I can't say the same. I can't understand how this happened or why it took place. What I do know is that this woman's worst fear became a reality. I truly regret what took place and very much resent this other man for ever approaching and pursuing me, but most of all I resent myself. I find it difficult with each day to forgive myself or even accept my mistake. I don't know how I'll ever be able to overcome this.

Peggy's Response:

This letter illustrates how easy it is for someone to take actions as a result of one set of problems—only to create a *different* set of problems. I must quickly add, however, that the early reference to physical and mental abuse indicates an *extremely* serious problem—that needed to have been addressed *directly*. (It's a wonder the fear of retaliation isn't coming from the husband instead of the wife of the other man.)

But I'll try to address some of the many issues presented, including a friendship turning into an affair, "properly" discussing the end of the affair, the obsessive behavior of the other wife, and the desire to "make her understand it is over."

First of all, the woman who wrote this letter understandably regrets having had the affair. It was, of course, a very poor way of dealing with her loneliness. While she never expected the "friendship" to turn into an affair, this is extremely common. And it probably *could* have been detected—if there had been a genuine desire to recognize what was happening at an earlier point. In fact, it's a good bet that the other wife *did* recognize the potential for an affair back when it was *only* a friendship. The fact that her obsessive behavior began long before the affair began *may* indicate that she detected the possibility of an affair before the people involved recognized what was happening.

As for regrets at not having "a chance to properly discuss it" with the other man—it's really too late for that to matter at this point. It would seem that there was not good clarity/discussion all along at every step of the way—and at this point it's not reasonable to think of going back and getting clarity about what happened. It's only a *primary* relationship that needs/deserves the effort to "clean up" the past—*not* an affair. So staying away is almost certainly the best thing to do.

As for wondering "how to make [the other man's wife] understand it is over," there's probably nothing that can be said or done to alleviate her fear/concern. All too often saying *anything* winds up only making matters worse. It's *usually* better to say nothing—because *any* contact is likely to just reinforce the obsessiveness over this whole situation. Also, most people are likely to feel that "involving the authorities" is only adding insult to injury—that they have a *right* to their obsessive behavior.

I can't possibly give any specific advice as to what might be the best course of action. But, obviously, "relocating to another neighborhood" would resolve a lot of the issues. (And based on the statement about actual "fear for my life," it might be worth doing *whatever* it takes to make that happen.)

On the other hand, because of the fear, *if* there's no way to avoid being thrown into the same environment, it may feel like it's essential to say/do something. So—if the obsessiveness continues and there is a decision to try to say something to the wife—it may be safer to *write* than to speak. And whatever is expressed needs to be *totally* geared toward reassuring the wife (with *no* effort to explain/defend/complain about any of it). It needs to be *only* a note of genuine regret and apology for the pain that has been caused.

As for "how I'll ever be able to overcome this," much of the healing from this kind of experience simply requires time. It takes time to assimilate such painful experiences and find ways to grow stronger by virtue of dealing with them. So while there may be regret over what happened, there can be pride in handling the fallout in a responsible way. And since we often learn more from our mistakes than our successes, we can use whatever crises we face as an opportunity to learn something that allows us to be better people in the future.

I'd like to stop...

Question:

I am a married woman currently involved in an extramarital affair with a married man. It began with talking on the Internet and has led to an ongoing all-out affair. The problem is that I really and truly would like to stop it, but my feelings are so strong for him and not my husband that it is making it almost impossible. My marriage was not good at all before all of this started, of course. I would not have even agreed to meet him if I had a marriage that satisfied me.

My lover says that his marriage is great. He has said it from the beginning and has also said that he would never leave. I have noticed lately that my feelings for him seem to be a bit more intense than his for me. I say that because it seems that I am constantly thinking of him and writing and letting him know. He says his feelings are the same or more, but actions speak much louder than words. That is what I have always believed.

I do not know how I got so wrapped up in this thing but it is all I can do not to think of him and what he is doing when we do not talk. Please give me some pointers on what I could do to get myself out of this. Also, how can I look to my husband for the same emotional support that I got from this other man? Please help me.

Peggy's Response:

This letter describes the classic struggle a person can have in trying to *act* in accordance with their *thinking*. There seems to be a pretty clear understanding that the affair is a "dead-end relationship." At least the other man is being candid in acknowledging that his marriage is great and he would never leave. (Actually, this is quite common among men having affairs—whether or not they admit it.) While this *should* make it easier to walk away, sometimes the unattainable seems all the more appealing (think Romeo and Juliet).

One of the reasons that her "feelings for him seem to be a bit more intense than his..." may be the fact that he feels he has a good marriage while she feels that her marriage "was not good at all." (This too is common—in that women are more likely to say their affair is due to some problem/shortcoming/disappointment with their marriage.)

The irony, of course, is that there's almost no chance of improving the marriage unless/until the contact is severed with the other man. So any effort to look to the husband for emotional support can only reasonably happen when a person is no longer looking to the third party for emotional support. Once there is *no* contact and *no* support from the third party, there's likely to be more motivation for figuring out how to seek emotional support from the husband—and for being willing to do whatever it takes to make the husband aware of just what is needed/wanted. As for "how to get myself out of this"—the magic word is *myself*. No one else can do it for you. And the very first step in being able to do it is to genuinely, wholeheartedly *want* to do it. This is likely to happen only when there is a full acceptance of the uselessness of postponing the inevitable. One of the reasons we put off doing something that is distasteful to us is that we hope to somehow avoid ever having to do it; whereas if we fully accept that it's eventually going to happen, we're more likely to want to "get it over with," however painful. The delay and the staying in limbo does not lessen the pain; it just drags it out longer. So it's important to consistently remind yourself of that reality when your emotions interfere with rational thinking about the whole situation.

What do I do about my affair?

(While most of the questions I receive are from those who are struggling with a partner's affair—I also receive questions from the person who has had an affair. So this week I'm printing 10 of these letters below, before responding to some of the issues faced by the third party in an affair.)

Question #1:

After reading your site I was flabbergasted to know that my situation is textbook. I am a 36-year old female, married for 13 years and involved in an affair for 7. So here is the age old question.... do I end the affair (we work together) and lose the man I will always truly be in love with, connect with, who makes me laugh and makes my life have meaning or re-build the marriage with a man I haven't a shred of feeling, for the sake of my 5 year old child and my spouse?

Question #2:

I have been involved in an affair for about 6 months. We are very much in love, only his wife found out and we are ending it since he has 3 children and doesn't want to hurt them or his wife. She has contacted me and wants to know if we are in love as she is devastated. I think I should lie, but you say honesty is critical. What to do?

Question #3:

My lover's wife found out about us and we have severed all contact. She has established contact with me and wants to know if he and I were in love. I am afraid to be honest and destroy her hopes. He is a very good man and will always do the right things by his family. He did love me very much in a more intimate way than he ever felt about her. She only fills the role of wife and mother. Should I lie?

Question #4:

I had an affair with my boss that lasted 9 months, we ended it but now it seems like I just can't let go. Do you think that it is possible to work with someone that you had an affair with and be able to change your feelings?

Question #5:

My husband is away on deployment and recently I have had feelings for someone else, so I acted upon them and now cannot stop being with this person. I keep telling my husband I love him so much (and I do!) but I like the way I feel when I am with this other male. What should I do? Should I tell my husband? It feels like I can't stop feeling the way I do about this person! HELP!

Question #6:

I have just started an affair with a married man. I know it is not a good thing for me but I have not had a serious boyfriend in a few years, so right now this man fills a void. Am I being a complete selfish fool to want this right now?

Question #7:

I was having an affair with a married man, but he moved away. I still talk to him a lot and can't stop thinking of him. When will I know if it is right to leave my husband, and join my other man? He wants to leave his wife; this I know, but it's me who is scared to leave my husband.

Question #8:

I have been dating this married man for three years now. He lives with me, and his wife knows it. Anything that comes up dealing with my family he is always included, but when it comes to his, that is another story. I have yet to meet his children. I have asked numerous times and tried to explain

my feelings to him but he says he wants a divorce but does not want to hurt the kids. I honestly do not know how to handle this anymore. It is putting me into a depressed state of mind. Help!

Question #9:

I have been having an affair with a married man who I work with for over a year. I have fallen in love with him. I don't know how he feels about me but how do I know if this man has feelings for me. He has 3 kids that he loves very much. He stands to lose a lot because he has a lot of money and very well known along with his business. Please HELP..... How can I tell if he cares about me and does him being with me a year mean he does have feelings or is time irrelevant?

Question #10:

I have found many articles and material written about affairs, their affect, the devastation and recovery. This has helped me in my understanding of the situation. The problem I have is that I have found nothing concerning the recovery for the other woman (or man) that was involved with a married man. Her recovery is just as difficult, but I have found nothing in the ways of support to help her/him through this excruciating time. Do you know where to find non-judgmental support?

Peggy's Response:

As you can see from the above letters, there are many painful situations faced by the person who is having (or has had) an affair—whether they are a married person or a single person involved with someone who is married. Most people have very little compassion for those in this position, but when it comes to affairs, everyone gets hurt.

Since the people who wrote are trying to figure out what to do—and not just blindly continuing down what is almost certainly a dead-end, I'll try to address some of the key issues.

Do I end the affair? It's always better to end the affair sooner rather than later—because the odds are stacked against a future with someone when it begins as an affair. (The statistics I've seen indicate that the chances of marrying the affair partner are only about 10%—and that even if there is a marriage, the divorce rate for that group is about 75%.) So no rational person would seriously wish for this kind of "future."

Do I tell the wife that "we are in love?" Should I lie? It would be unwise to say anything to the wife, especially declaring the love you share with her husband. I've written about this before, but basically there's a difference between being "in love" and a broader, deeper, more long-lasting "love." 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. The "newness" of any relationship, whether it begins as a prelude to marriage or as an affair, creates a feeling of "being in love." But that's just the initial stage of a relationship. 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." 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. 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.

What about the general plight of the other woman? As I said at the beginning of this week's column, one of the clear messages I've gotten from all the stories I've heard is that in most cases *everyone* gets hurt. One reason there has been less sympathy/empathy for the pain of the one who had an affair is because it's usually seen as something they "brought on themselves." However, I'm firmly convinced that many/most people don't intend to have an affair. They get caught up in a situation (fascinated by the fantasy of it—and the relief from "normal, everyday life" with it's

normal problems and responsibilities) that they begin to rationalize about the whole situation. They get in far deeper emotionally than they expect—and wind up with the kind of emotions described above. There's a certain "idealization" that frequently goes on (with something of a Romeo and Juliet quality) that makes the loss of the lover feel all the more emotionally difficult.

Can I change my feelings? It's not smart to sit around waiting (hoping) for the feelings to somehow magically change. But by changing behavior (for instance, severing all contact and focusing on other aspects of life), the feelings will gradually eventually change. It might help to continually remind yourself that these feelings were based on a short-term fantasy situation that was never realistically going to result in a positive future. All the various "reasons" (rationalizations) as to why the future is continually postponed can keep someone waiting and hoping for a future that will never come. (And, as mentioned above, even if there were to initially be an effort to establish a "future together," the odds are overwhelmingly against that ever working out.)

The most effective way of dealing with the feelings/emotions is with some strong rational thinking. This involves recognizing (and even appreciating) whatever seemed to be "special" about this relationship—but acknowledging that rationally it was viewed through "rose-colored glasses" that weren't accurate or "real." Naturally, it feels real, but that's the emotional part; a more rational focus makes it clear that the relationship existed in a certain fantasy vacuum-outside the normal real world. And further, if the relationship continued, it would eventually lose that "special" quality—because the specialness is based more on fantasy than reality and the specialness of the particular person is primarily because of the role they place in this fantasy—not because of who they are as a person.

So instead of viewing the ending of the relationship as a "loss," it might help to view it as a "protection" against the inevitable end of the fantasy if it had continued over an extended period of time. (Most affairs—and specifically this fantasy period—last between 6 months and 2 years. They can last longer if there is greater physical distance and/or less frequent contact, but they DO change.) So one way of dealing with the painful emotions around this situation is to appreciate the fact the loss was only the loss of a fantasy, not the loss of a realistic life situation. ("Happy-every-after" is only for fairytales.)

For more information, see the article under the "Articles about Affairs" section of the website titled "Is there any help for the third party?"

Why can't I do the "right" thing?

Question:

I am having difficulties ending my affair. I have been involved with "Ann" for nearly 3 years--she strikes a chord in me like no other woman has. Our affair, which began while I was in doctoral training, prompted a separation from my wife. I have been separated now for nearly the time of the affair, but feel like I'm in limbo. I can't be honest with either woman, but know that the "right" thing to do is end my affair. Help!

Peggy's Response:

While most of the questions I receive (and choose for a response) are from people whose spouses have had affairs, this question from someone who is involved in an affair affords an opportunity for people on both sides of the situation to get more clarity and perspective on issues like the one described above.

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 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.

Many people prefer 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.

The affair can get to be a pleasant habit that's hard to drop. People may get caught up in the fantasy part the affair (the relief from "normal, everyday life" with its normal problems/issues/responsibilities) that they begin to rationalize about the whole situation. They get far more attached to this fantasy situation than they expect or want to admit. In fact, there's a certain "idealization" of the fantasy relationship (with something of a Romeo and Juliet quality) that makes the idea of giving up the affair feel all the more emotionally difficult.

One way to get out of this limbo and finally give up the affair is to recognize that in addition to the unfairness to the wife, it's also unfair to the other woman. She, too, is in limbo—a limbo that almost always leads to a dead-end. That's because even if an affair does eventually lead to divorce, only about 10% of people wind up marrying the person with whom they had an affair. And since second marriages (whether or not the relationship began as an affair) have an even higher divorce rate than first marriages, the chances for a long-term relationship that began as an affair is extremely small.

Ending the affair doesn't necessarily mean that the marriage will be rebuilt. But at least there can be 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. Now the decision can be strictly focused on "marriage" vs. "no marriage" rather than choosing one woman/situation over the other. Regardless of the eventual decision about rebuilding the marriage, severing the relationship with the other woman allows the limbo period to end.

(An additional motivation for ending the affair may be to focus on the fact that it's not just the "right" thing to do, but also the "smart" thing to do—for the sake of everyone involved.)

How can I move on when I feel so ashamed?

Question:

It has been over a year since my affair. I'm devastated about the damage I caused. I hurt so many people, including my husband. He says he has forgiven me, and I believe him, but I can't forgive myself. The way I'm acting is affecting my husband's healing. Everyday, I experience painful triggers of what I did and how I acted. I remember more things, and it makes me feel such panic. I'm so ashamed of myself. All I want is to move on. How do I do that?

Peggy's Response:

Most of the "questions" I receive are from the spouse of the person who had an affair, but I do also receive some questions from the one involved in an affair. And the above letter is quite typical: trying to find a way to cope with the feelings of guilt and shame. So I will re-visit some of the comments I've made in the past— and add some specific ideas for "moving on."

One of the keys to moving on is to refuse to dwell on the painful triggers and the remembering/reviewing the actions that give rise to the feelings of panic and shame. For instance, there's a basic rule that "what you feed is what grows." So while it's unreasonable to think you can prevent the thoughts/feelings from coming in the first place, you CAN make a difference based on how you react when they come.

For instance, if (when you start thinking about the past), you go ahead and review every detail in your mind and obsess about it, you actually reinforce the feelings of panic and shame. However, on the other hand, when the thoughts/feelings come, you can make a conscious, deliberate effort to focus on what you are doing now and what you can do in the future to learn from the experience and be the kind of person who feels good about themselves based on who they are *now*.

It's important to accept the fact that our actions can not be erased or undone, but that we can dig deep inside and discover some way to become a better person by virtue of this experience. So the first step is letting go of thinking "if only..." and looking toward "what can I do to demonstrate that I've learned an important lesson" from this experience. No matter how difficult something is to deal with, there's always the potential for learning from it - and using these learnings to forge a more responsible and more fulfilling life. This focus and process can be of great help in counteracting the feelings of guilt or regret.

Frankly, a great deal of the "strength of character" that people exhibit comes from the process of surviving some crisis that has severely tested them as a person. To paraphrase a famous saying by the philosopher Nietzsche: "That which doesn't kill me makes me stronger." Every crisis we face in life is also an opportunity to grow stronger, and responsibly dealing with the fall-out from this experience can actually strengthen you as a person.

What should I do?

Question:

I am a minister and had an affair with a married woman. She got pregnant and had a child. Everyone looks down on her because they know she had an affair. She hasn't revealed my name, but I feel like a coward. I'm stressed! What should I do????

Peggy's Response:

Since I never give "advice" as to what a specific individual should do, I certainly wouldn't begin now by advising a minister about how to handle this situation. However, I chose to respond to this letter because it highlights several critical aspects about affairs that people tend to ignore or deny.

First, it provides perspective that challenges the commonly-held beliefs about who will or won't have an affair, illustrating that anyone is vulnerable. *Second*, it involves an additional dynamic: when one party is in a "professional" position in relation to the other party in the affair. *Third*, it includes the special situation involved when a child results from an affair. *Fourth*, it draws attention to the need to make decisions based on a careful assessment of their impact on others.

Regarding the fact that this letter was received from a minister: This is not an unheard-of situation; in fact, I've heard it many times through the years. But people still tend to assume that some people (like ministers) are immune to doing something like this. It's *not* the case that only "bad" people have affairs and "good" people don't. It happens to all kinds of people from all walks of life. Anyone is vulnerable.

Regarding the special situation where a "professional" relationship has crossed the line: It's not clear from this letter whether the writer served as the minister to the woman with whom he had an affair. However, this is more likely than not. People who develop close professional relationships are often vulnerable to having the relationship spill over into a personal connection. This is especially common in the workplace, but also happens in other professional settings, including clergymen, therapists, doctors, etc. In fact, the more personally in-depth the sharing, the more risk there is that the relationship could eventually cross the line.

Regarding the situation when a child results from an affair: This also happens far more often than most people realize. Unfortunately, despite this risk, most people never *think* of this possibility; or if they do, they rationalize that it won't happen. While there are never easy answers in handling the fall-out from an affair, this compounds an already difficult situation and requires an even greater degree of clear thinking about how to deal with it.

Regarding how to go about making a decision as to what to do: The basic approach to making a decision is that it should not be made based on feelings of guilt (or cowardice, as mentioned above) or any other personal needs/wants/desires. These need to be set aside in favor of doing whatever is best for everyone concerned—especially in this case when an innocent child is involved.

Obviously, this calls for making a very careful assessment of the impact of any potential decision and/or actions on others. But since it's not reasonable to make this judgment on behalf of others, the first step is to determine what they want—whether it is to step forward, to stay silent, or to step away (perhaps *far* away).

The bottom line is that there is no way to "make this all right." There will be pain (and stress) for everyone—no matter what decision is made—so considering only your own pain is not the best basis for making a decision. Ultimately, the best way to alleviate your personal pain and stress is to do whatever might help relieve the pain and stress of others—based on what they think would be best.

How do I deal with the guilt from my affair?

Question:

I had an affair after seven years of marriage and have since ended it. The feelings of guilt have been so overwhelming I have even had thoughts of suicide. I have chosen for now not to tell my partner since it would only be for the purpose of easing my guilt. How can I heal myself. I want to dedicate myself to my marriage—the affair was a mistake—how do I go on?

Peggy's Response:

The personal pain from the guilt of having an affair (and the stress of keeping such a secret) can be overwhelming. But it's *not* wise to tell a partner—if it's for the purpose of easing the guilt. However, it can be easier to bear the pain if there's a conscious effort to work *toward* the *possibility* of someday telling. This involves gradually increasing the level and depth of honesty within the relationship. While the time may never come when there's a decision to tell of the affair, this path *will* lead to a greater closeness and satisfaction in the relationship.

As for how to deal with the guilt, this is just a part of the reality and challenge of any life crisis (like being responsible for the death of someone else in an automobile accident). When we're faced with the consequences of actions that can not be erased or undone, it calls for digging deep inside and discovering some way to become better people by virtue of this experience. So the first step is letting go of thinking "if only..." and looking toward "what can I do to demonstrate that I've learned an important lesson" from this experience. And, further, how can I take this learning and use it to help others. The answers to those questions will be personal and individual, but it's worth the effort—both for your own sake and for the sake of those close to you, as well as others who have been affected (or could be affected) by this kind of experience.

How can an affair be forgiven?

Question:

I made a grave error in judgment when I had an affair about 4 years ago. I understand that he is angry and has every right to be. I'm terribly sorry for my actions and desperately want to be forgiven and to get on with our lives—but I don't know what to do to help him get through the depression, hurt, pain etc. Even after all this time, he still says he has no hope for the future and lives day to day. Any information that you can give me would be of great help.

Peggy's Response:

Most people involved in this kind of situation want closure and feel that "forgiveness" can bring the kind of closure that allows them to "get on with our lives." When this much time has passed and there's still anger or depression that stands in the way of forgiveness, it may be because the couple has tried to "put the affair behind them and go on" without fully dealing with it. 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—and the depression or anger often continue indefinitely.

It's not enough for someone to say they're sorry for their actions or to make promises about the future. It takes concrete answers that can only come when there's more understanding of the issue of affairs in general and of their own experience in particular. Any effort at "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."

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."

What should I do now?

Question:

I've been married for 5 years, and my husband and I married for the "old fashioned" reason....we were in love. I have always had high moral beliefs; my thoughts on extramarital affairs were those of disgust. I thought anyone who was willing to have an affair should at least have the courage to end their marriage first. Unfortunately, I broke all my own rules, and wound up having an affair. I can't believe I, of all people, have let it go this far. I am at a loss as to what to do now.

Peggy's Response:

This letter is a clear illustration of the fact that "anyone is vulnerable" and "no one is immune" from an affair. It's almost as if thinking "it can't happen to me" can make a person even more vulnerable—because they aren't on guard. It's only when it's too late that they stop and really think about what they did—as described in this letter. So the first learning from this experience is to recognize that our typical assumptions that the person who has an affair is weak, insecure, uncaring, or a generally "bad" person—isn't based in reality. In fact, all kinds of people have affairs, not just certain types.

The second learning is to recognize that nothing will change the past, but there's a good opportunity now to change the future. This involves continuing the process of thinking rationally and clearly about the inevitable consequences of continuing this kind of path—and doing something to change it. While an affair is not a good way to get a clear grasp of what a person wants out of life, an affair often helps identify what they don't want. It can be used as a kind of "wake-up call" to take a good look at what's happening in their life and what "practical" (rather than "fantasy") steps might be taken to make things better.

As I've said before, marriages aren't necessarily unstable or doomed when the first romantic flush of love wanes. It's a natural stage of love that can be nurtured into the next stage that is far deeper and more meaningful. This calls for a degree of maturity and thought. So, there's no specific "advice" that can be given as to what actions to take, but doing this kind of reflection and consideration of the practical factors involved is a good first step.

How can we end our affair?

Question:

How can we end an affair if we are both in love? This guy and I are both married. We have been seeing one another for about 9 months. For the past month I feel that he has been drifting away. Is this the way affairs usually ends, by just drifting apart?

Peggy's Response:

The answers to the question about "how to end the affair" can be as varied as reflected in Paul Simon's song, "50 Ways to Leave your Lover." So I won't try to respond to that particular part of this question.

However, I can provide some perspective about the general pattern of affairs, including the timing of the "ending." Most affairs last between 6 months and 2 years. It usually takes about 6 months for the initial euphoric period to subside enough to reflect more clearly on the nature of the relationship. At that point, it's not at all unusual for one of the parties to begin "drifting away" and trying to put some distance between them.

While some people can bring themselves to make a clean break, others feel ambivalent as to just what they want. They tend to think that somehow it would be easier and safer to simply step back a little from the degree of involvement that has existed up to that point. This may also be seen as a more "considerate" way to end the affair. However, there's really no way to end it without somebody feeling hurt and/or rejected.

It may help to focus on the fact that from the moment an affair begins, everything is generally moving toward an inevitable ending. So the initial pleasure usually ends with pain. In some ways, however, the pain of ending an affair in this way is not as bad as the alternative—when a spouse discovers the affair before it has ended. Of course, there may be a period of "blaming" the spouse for the end of the affair, but the fact is that most affairs do end—regardless of whether or not they are discovered.

It's generally accepted that only about 10 percent of married people who have an affair actually divorce their spouse and marry the person with whom they had the affair. (Most people do *not* get a divorce, but even if they do divorce, marriage to the affair partner is highly unlikely.)

So it may be a blessing in disguise when an affair cools off and the affair partner drifts away—before even more damage is done to everyone involved. Even then, of course, there's no guarantee that at some point in the future one of the spouses won't somehow still discover that the affair took place. Even though it may not feel that way at the time, a situation like the one described in the above letter (where the affair partner is "drifting away") may be less difficult to deal with than some of the other alternatives.

What about "helping" her to get caught?

Question:

I'm married and having an affair with a married woman. I want to divorce and marry her, while she seems more content to keep things as they are. I've been considering secretly "helping" her to get caught by her husband to force our affair to either end or so they split and we can marry one another. I realize this is selfish but I need closure. She is the woman I want to spend my life with. Would I be a fool to force the issue? Would I most likely end up losing her?

Peggy's Response:

While most of the questions we address relate to the impact on the person whose spouse has had an affair, the above description from the viewpoint of a married person involved in an affair with another married person shows the implications for *everyone* involved in this situation. Many people never stop to realize how many people's lives are affected by their affairs. It's simply not as much a "personal" issue as we've often believed.

Since this is such an emotional issue for everyone concerned, it's no wonder that there's so little clear thinking. But the above letter illustrates the need for a "reality-check." For instance, even when people get divorced due to an affair, only about 10% of them wind up marrying the person with whom they were having an affair. And among those few who do marry, second marriages (even when affairs are not involved) have a 60% chance of divorce.

So, all in all, even "winning" this battle (of forcing a divorce of the current spouses) may mean "losing" the war. And since everyone has to live with the consequences of their actions, it's questionable that a "successful" resolution would be worth the price in terms of the casualties (among the spouses, children, or other family members).

It's understandable to want "closure" to a situation of this kind, but there are other far more responsible ways to reach closure. Also, it's important to strive for a kind of "closure" that doesn't create an even worse situation than before the closure was reached. So although the very last question is: "Would I most likely end up losing her?"—the more important question is "Would I wind up losing *everything*."

Should I have an affair?

Question:

I'm very unhappy in my marriage. My husband does not show me the affection I feel I deserve. I know a man that is in-love with me. It makes me happy to know he is in love with me, but I don't think I love him. I am strongly considering an affair. I feel love and affection is missing in my life. What should I do?

Peggy's Response:

The statement in this letter about considering an affair just because it "makes me happy to know he is in love with me" (even though "I don't think I love him")—is a classic description of what is all too often the case with women: "wanting to be wanted." While everyone needs and deserves feeling loved and having affection in their lives, this particular way of seeking it is likely to be very disappointing. It's also likely to add some new problems to whatever problems already exist.

When "love and affection are missing," it's important to keep in mind that the solution is not just in "feeling *loved*," but in "feeling *loving*" as well. It's much more satisfying to have a reciprocal loving relationship than one that is one-way—and it's more satisfying to have a relationship based on honesty than on deception. So a satisfying resolution of the dilemma described above almost certainly won't happen through having an affair.

Usually, what's needed in a situation like this is *not* to look for validation from others, but to value ourselves and seek ways to feel good about ourselves and about life in general that do not carry such a high price tag. This situation can best be viewed as a "wake-up call" for seriously considering what's really important in life and making whatever life changes would help to address this in a responsible way.

Why do I dream of someone else?

Question:

I'm happily married, but I've met someone that I find extremely attractive. I would never have an affair, but I do dream about what it would be like to have a relationship with this guy. Am I a terrible spouse?

Peggy's Response:

It's normal to feel attractions to other people—no matter how much we love our spouse. It's helpful to remember that it's also natural for your partner to find others attractive. It's probably something you don't want to think about because you'd like to believe that neither of you would ever be attracted to someone else. But understanding that attractions to others are normal and inevitable (no matter how much you love each other), can be the first step toward being able to keep them in perspective. If you see attractions as a direct threat to your love (thinking that if you or your partner love each other, you would never be attracted to anyone else), you're granting power to attractions that they would not otherwise possess. Attractions are not, in and of themselves, a problem. The problem comes when they are acted on. And the best way to decrease the likelihood of that happening is for a couple to honestly discuss this issue and their feelings about it on an ongoing basis.

If you try to deny the possibility of attractions, you send a subtle (or not so subtle) signal to your partner that you don't want to know about any of their feelings of attraction toward others. Since attractions are both normal and inevitable, you're in essence sending a message that says, "Lie to me; pretend you're never attracted to anyone else." This, of course, causes other problems related to honesty that can have serious consequences for your relationship. 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. While it seems scary at first, talking honestly about your attractions and how to deal with them actually reduces their power and effect. Talking about your attractions reduces the danger that you will act on them.

Am I nuts to get involved?

Question:

My marriage is in a crisis situation, but I'm committed to stick with this marriage until my son is grown. However, I also think it's about time I started thinking about myself. I have met a man online. He is also married, but I care deeply for him and he for me. We want to meet, but we live far apart. Is it realistic to think we are in love? Can this only lead to hurt? I sometimes feel I'm really nuts to let myself get so involved.

Peggy's Response:

This writer indicates that she already has a pretty good understanding of her situation by virtue of wondering if she's "nuts to get involved." Her confusion is typical when what someone "knows" contradicts what they "wish."

The desire to "start thinking about myself" can be a positive step—because as women, we frequently put ourselves last. However, it's a huge leap to assume that getting involved in this relationship would be positive. There's likely to be some pleasure and some pain, but probably the pleasure will be short-term and the pain will be long-term.

So while no one can predict the outcome in any specific instance, it may be that the best aspect of this online connection is simply to serve as a "wake-up call" to find a way to truly do something good for herself. But pursuing this relationship is probably not the answer to that issue.

How do I know what I really want?

Question:

I have been married for 21 years. I am 40 years old and have a 20 year old and a younger child, plus a little grandchild. I love all of them very much, and my husband is a good man that I would never want to hurt. But lately it has been getting harder to put aside my feelings for a friend I have known for 24 years. (We used to date as kids, then I met my husband and got married.)

Through the years this friend has been in and out of my life, and recently I've feel like my feelings have grown stronger for him, (at least I think so). I am not sure how to tell if that is what it is or maybe he's just an excuse for me to leave—not because my husband is mean, I just feel like I have outgrown him and ready to move on. I have learned how to depend on myself, so I guess my question is: how do I know if it's the friend I want to be with or just a way out on my own?

Peggy's Response:

First of all, one member of a couple often feels they've "outgrown" the other. This usually means they've "grown apart" due to a failure to communicate about how each of them is changing through the years. Everybody changes; we don't stay the same person we were when we got married. But it's seldom the changes per se that create distance; it's usually the lack of talking to each other about the changes taking place in our values, priorities and what we want out of life.

Having said that, it's also true that at some point it seems more reasonable to question whether it's really something else that's "calling you away." In this case, she is very astute to recognize that the "stronger feelings" that have recently grown toward a long-time friend are likely only a symptom of a need to be on her own rather than a need to be with "him." It's quite common to revert back to an earlier time or earlier relationship when we're in the process of re-thinking our lives. But it's usually much more difficult to think clearly about what we really want unless we take time to do it on our own.

So while I would never presume to know in a given situation what the desire to "move on" really means, in this instance it sounds as if there is already a sense that she really wants to be on her own. It's just that switching to the friend may seem safer or more convenient or simply more "known" than going out completely alone. It's helpful to do some careful thinking (and planning) about major life changes prior to taking any significant steps. Even the simple process of writing down thoughts can be helpful in clarifying these kinds of issues.

Which man and which lifestyle?

Question:

I'm at odds. My husband and I have different goals, wants, needs and lifestyles. But my lover and I both want the same lifestyle. I love my husband, but I feel that I am no longer in love with him. Because of our ages, all of us feel that time is running out. The question is which, when and how?

Peggy's Response:

While the specific question as to "which, when, and how" focuses on choosing between two men and two different lifestyles, it may be that that focus is too narrow. Sometimes it's impossible to think clearly and make good decisions when choices are defined in terms of "either-or." The best way to make a good decision about the future (whether in this kind of situation or any life circumstance) is to step back from the immediate dilemma and do a life assessment based on a much broader basis.

Here are some questions that can help anyone trying to make important life decisions:

What is my overall quality of life? What's changing? What is my self-image? What roles do I play? What motivates me? How am I balancing my priorities? How am I using my time and energy? What are my values? What means most to me? What do I like to do? What am I good at? What difference do I make? What's my level of satisfaction with life: physical, mental, intellectual, spiritual?

These kinds of questions can help to reflect on life in terms of the "bigger picture," of looking beyond just this moment. A quick way to get a general sense of the direction of your life is to imagine you've just been told you have a short time to live; reflect on your life, and complete the sentence beginning with "If only...." (If only I had done... or If only I could do...). This kind of exercise can help in getting better perspective on any life dilemma, including the one described above.

Why won't he believe me?

Question:

I had an affair that did not include "sex," but my husband won't believe me. I don't know what to do.

Peggy's Response:

Even when no "sex" is involved, it's completely understandable (and predictable) that a spouse will suspect there was—because in most instances, people "confess" in stages and do not tell the whole truth at the beginning. It's only after an extended period of developing confidence in the "truth-telling" about *all* issues that they feel "safe" enough to believe this truth.

It's also difficult for most spouses to believe there was no sex because they know that if a relationship like this goes on long enough, it will probably eventually include sex. So even if they think maybe it hadn't already happened, they may feel it was only a matter of time—and they have difficulty trusting that it was stopped "in time."

Also, in most instances it's not the "sex" per se that's the most difficult to recover from—it's the deception. Most people recover from the fact that their partner had sex with someone else before they recover from the fact that they were deceived. Trust is a very big issue after any deception. I wish you well in your efforts to reestablish that trust.

What about extenuating circumstances?

Question:

I am dealing with a terminally ill wife, and I've been involved with an affair for the past 8 years. My lover is now divorced, and we are considering the possibility of marriage. I would love to hear your spin on this.

Peggy's Response:

This situation is one of many that involve "extenuating circumstances." Most people, of course, try to find some "rationalization or justification" for their affair, but some, like this one, carry much more weight.

In commenting on this situation, I'd like to restate that my whole approach is based on supporting "honesty"—not just "monogamy." Any decision a couple reaches mutually (whether it's monogamy or non-monogamy) is their own personal business. The big problem I've observed through the years in the problem with the "dishonesty and deception" when someone professes monogamy but deceptively has secret affairs.

Even regarding the specific situation of a terminally ill spouse, I would never presume to know enough about the situation to offer any individual comments. *in general*, I still believe the "honesty" issue is the central issue. Some couples in terminally ill situations reach an understanding/agreement that the "living" spouse may have other involvements. Of course, in discussing a full-time involvement (as getting a divorce to marry the other woman), this withdrawal of physical comfort and support during the dying process might feel to the spouse to be especially cruel—and hasten the death.

I have *no idea* how this would play out in any particular situation, but, in general, real terminal illness is such a significant life circumstance as to call for extraordinary sensitivity and consideration. And it's not just the impact on the spouse that calls for making a good judgment; it's also the long-term impact on your own sense of yourself. Obviously, we can have most anything we want—if we're willing to take the consequences. However, sometimes "sacrifice" doesn't actually feel like sacrifice if a person freely chooses to sacrifice what they personally "want"—especially if they come to the conclusion that they "want" to feel good about themselves as a person (even with the sacrifice) *more* than they "want" whatever personal preference they have identified.

One additional factor to a situation like this is that if there really is a terminal illness involved, it may not be a matter of *whether* to divorce and remarry so much as *when* to do so—since the terminal aspect means there will still be the opportunity to remarry without undergoing a divorce.

However, in the final analysis, no one can tell anyone else what to do in a situation like this. Trying to be as honest with yourself as possible and to think as clearly as possible will help determine what to do.

Best friends who also have sex

Question:

I'm a married female who has been having an affair with a married man for 3 years now. It is both a sexual and emotional attachment for both of us and gets stronger every year. A description might be best friends who also have sex. It may sound strange, but both of us manage to give the other pretty good advice on dealing with our spouses. We discuss everything. I would also say that both of our spouses are clueless about the affair and would describe our marriages as very good.

I can't seem to end the affair although I've tried 3 times. I know it's wrong and I hate myself for being so weak. Do you have any advice on how to distance yourself emotionally, so you can end an affair?

Peggy's Response:

When long-term affairs develop to the point where the people use each other as sounding boards for their "real" lives, it can become a special little cocoon that is very difficult to give up—sometimes even more difficult than a more passion-focused affair.

As for the spouses being "clueless," that's highly unlikely. That thinking is part of the rationalization that most people having affairs develop as a way of feeling OK about what they're doing. Even when marriage partners don't specifically suspect an affair, they sense the emotional distance that is an essential part of maintaining this kind of secret from their spouses.

It's common for the person having the affair to think their marriage is "very good" because *they* are feeling fine about things. (It's doubtful that their spouses feel the same way about the marriages.)

As to how to distance yourself emotionally in order to end an affair, naturally it's hard to just turn off emotions. (It's like saying "don't think of pink elephants;" the process of trying *not* to feel something simply serves to feed the feeling.) But anyone can distance themselves physically. And this can be the first step toward diminishing the strength of the emotional connection—since the feelings of closeness are reinforced by constantly confiding in each other.

No sexual desire for spouse

(Here are excerpts from 3 letters before my response.)

Question: (excerpt #1)

I am married with 3 children and I had an affair with a man who was married also. I felt unhappy in my marriage and so did he. My husband and I rarely had sex before the affair because I am not sexually attracted to him at all. I actually dread sex with my husband. I give in so that he won't be mad at me. I feel grossed out during sex with him and I want to get it over with. I can't just leave him. We have 3 small children together. I don't work and I would have nowhere to go. There is one positive side of my marriage. We are good friends and have a lot in common. I do love him as a person, but not sexually. I am afraid that I will go back and have another affair. I am still talking to guys on the Internet, and it will be any day before I do it again. All I want is to start over. This time fall in love first, with someone I am sexually attracted to. Then have a family and never ever stray. I know I am STUCK in my marriage and I am in pain. Any advice? Thank you.

Question: (excerpt #2)

I have not had an affair but I have thought about it on several occasions. Our relationship has changed and I find myself no longer attracted to him sexually. Sexually, I am no longer fulfilled but scared to say anything to my husband because I know he will think there is someone else. That is a can of worms I don't want to open! There is a man that I know and we have become good friends. Nothing intimate has happened but I find myself strangely drawn to him and I have often imagined a relationship with him.

I love my husband and I have committed most of my life to him, and the last thing I want to accomplish is hurting my husband. If you have any suggestions as to how I can "rekindle the fire" in my marriage, it would be greatly appreciated.

Question: (excerpt #3)

I was involved in an affair for over two years. Both of us are married. His wife discovered the affair almost a year ago, but the affair continued for at least another 6 months. It finally ended when I told my lover that I was tired of sneaking around and lying. I was willing to leave my husband to be with him but he chose to stay with his wife and family. I was devastated for quite awhile. Throughout this time, my husband's love never wavered. He continues to love me; in fact, his love for me seems to have increased because of his fear over losing me.

Over time, I have adjusted to my life without my lover. I realize my feelings for him were more intense than his for me. I was disappointed he chose to stay with his wife. I want to work things out with my husband. Obviously, our marriage wasn't perfect before the affair. Now, my husband expects me to feel sexually attracted to him and wants the same passion from me that I showed with my lover. I don't have those feelings for my husband.

I think of him more as an old, dear friend. Is this normal? He won't accept this type of relationship and it is very frustrating for him to feel this great passion for me and not have it returned. How do I deal with this? Is there a way to get these feelings back for my husband?

Peggy's Response:

It's normal for there to be problems like this in a long-term marital relationship. In a "new" relationship, the sheer excitement of it may give rise to sexual feelings. In a long-term relationship, sexual feelings are often an outgrowth of loving feelings. If someone doesn't have "loving feelings" at this point, they also may not feel like having sex; or if they do have sex, they may not be very passionate.

I don't think sexy tricks and gimmicks help at all, but there are a couple of things that might help recover the loving feelings. First of all, try to be aware of any spontaneous positive feeling (however slight)—and act on it immediately. This doesn't mean jumping in bed or even being sexual. But even when not feeling particularly sexual, there are moments when some little incident will trigger a positive feeling. If at any point your partner just says something, or does something, or looks a certain way, or smells a certain way—or anything that triggers memories of more loving times, don't hold back. Let yourself touch, or hug, or just say something nice.

Also, physical activity helps a person's general feelings, their sexual feelings, and their "generous" feelings (which are connected to feeling sensual). So anything that makes you feel more *alive* (which frequently happens with more physical activity) can help stimulate feelings that are more expansive and expressive in all aspects of life, including sexual.

Loving or sexual or passionate feelings need to be nurtured. Just waiting for them to return isn't likely to happen; they won't just magically appear one day. You need to help them by noticing even the tiniest flutter of feeling. It's also important to have been sexually attracted to your spouse—at some point. This way you have a memory of what it was like once upon a time.

No relationship will ever maintain the kind of sexual excitement that is based on the newness inherent in an affair—no matter who the other person is. So unless someone is prepared to spend their lives going from one affair (or one partner) to another, this same issue will be repeated over and over again. If a couple once had the excitement in their relationship, they have just as good a chance of recovering it as they would if they started over with a new partner—since inevitably the new partner at some point ceases to be "new," and the excitement of the newness no longer applies.

One of the *most* significant factors that can increase sexual desire is feeling "connected" by virtue of having a really honest relationship—where nothing is withheld. This is because holding back in *any* area of life has an effect on holding back in others. No feelings (including sexual) can flow as freely unless *all* feelings flow freely. So whatever secrecy there was/still is regarding the affair may be having an impact on the degree of openness felt toward the marital partner. This is not something that can be resolved quickly or easily, but it's good to be aware of it in order to better understand and deal with the whole situation.

Also, we often feel more sexual desire for someone who is unattainable or who we're concerned about "losing." So trying to see your husband through the eyes of a new person who doesn't know him as an "old, dear friend" may help appreciate him as a *man*, not just in the role of *husband*.

For more perspective on the changing nature of love, here's an excerpt from our book, *Making Love Stay*:

Romantic love is just the first stage of love, and it either evolves into a deeper, richer love or it withers. It's necessary to move beyond the initial romantic stage of love to achieve the richness that's possible in a loving relationship. Lasting love is not a less desirable state; it's just different. It has its own unique form of intensity and excitement, both of which emerge from a deeper knowledge of yourself and your partner.

A Younger Man

Question:

Last spring, I met a young man by chance and we were very physically attracted to one another. We seemed to 'mesh' well together in conversation and intellect. He is not married, but we had no intention of furthering our conversation after our initial meeting, until we kept running into one another. Finally we found we were not only intellectually compatible, but also physically compatible. As many times as we admitted to each other that this is a huge risk, and we cannot speak again, neither of us had the 'strength' to stop the affair. I am now away from the place where we met, but we still communicate on the telephone. I feel a 'need' to speak to this man, and a definite 'want' to speak with him. My attachment is growing much more emotional toward him, and I find myself daydreaming about him very often.

My husband is a wonderful man, and if he knew that I had feelings such as this for another man, it would crush him. Occasionally, it is difficult for me to be interested sexually toward my husband, as I find myself wishing he was someone else. I need to get my 'life' back on track, and stop these emotions from taking over my thoughts. Do you have any comments about my situation?

Peggy's Response:

I'll begin by focusing on your relationship with your husband. (This might be a helpful approach for anyone in this position—to specifically, deliberately focus more on their primary relationship as a way of countering the "automatic" focus on the outside relationship.) As for the lack of sexual interest in the primary partner, this is not surprising when caught up in the euphoria of a "new love," whether emotional, physical or both. These new feelings are powerful and can block out rational thinking—as well as sexual feelings for the primary partner.

The longer there's a lack of sexual desire (or even much physical contact), the more strain and awkwardness is likely to develop—making the recovery of sexual intimacy even more difficult. While it's usually best to avoid "pretending" or "faking," it can be helpful to move toward "acting as if" the sexual feelings are already present as a way of stimulating them to come.

This letter shows an awareness that something needs to be done to change the current direction, which calls for making a conscious effort to stop so much daydreaming. Like meditation, it may not be possible to avoid *beginning* a daydream, but the dreaming can be stopped instead of fueled. So the first step in shifting back to reality is to do less dreaming and more rational thinking.

The above comments sound like most people in situations like this: at some level there's an awareness that this is getting out of control, but on the other hand there's a rationalization that somehow it won't lead to dire consequences. In most cases, this kind of situation is damaging to the primary relationship whether or not the spouse ever finds out—because when someone is obsessing about another person, it breaks the connection in more ways than just sexually. So if there's a genuine desire to stay in the marriage, the sooner there's a deliberate effort along the lines discussed here, the better.

Friendship to affair...

Question:

I married at 23 to the first man I've ever dated, was a virgin... Four years ago I had an affair. It ended, but I realized how sex could be and is not with my husband...I have tried to focus on just my husband and working on our relationship.

I met a man two years ago who I am just friends with, we are very close and I can talk to him about anything and he is very supportive of me. He has confessed to wanting more and so do I, but how can I just up and leave my husband and two children. I do love my husband but only as a friend...I don't have strong feelings for him sexually and haven't for years...I'm pretty sure I found my soul-mate in this other person if there is such a thing, but I wouldn't want to leap into that either, I would like time to be alone and figure what I want. Am I being selfish?

Peggy's Response:

Many of us as women never stop to figure out what we really want. We simply float along, assuming we'll get married and have kids, then wake up one day and wonder if we chose this path. I identify with this personally. While I'm very pleased with my life overall and would not change the way it has gone, I do realize that I never actually "chose" any of my major directions for the first 37 years of my life. But since then I've been much more deliberate about thinking through what I want. This is not necessarily "selfish;" in fact, getting clarity around our desires may help us realize that we would choose the same things all over again.

As for finding a *soul-mate*, leaving a marriage to pursue a soul-mate is an unrealistic way of thinking. No rational assessment of life can be made while jumping from one man to another. Doing so can wind up being a life-long pattern, never finding whatever is missing. It's a little like running all over the place searching for something—only to find that it's been right there within you all along. So finding a clear sense of who you are as a woman is a step toward accepting responsibility for your decisions—and for their consequences. It's usually much more difficult to think clearly about what we really want unless we take time to do it on our own.

I Wish I Knew

Question:

My wife and I have been married for 27 years. For the last 15 years I have traveled extensively developing my business (we own this company) and we have "drifted apart." We both still claim to "love" each other; (we have 2 children, 25 and 21, and they are well-balanced, well-focused, happy young people). My wife discovered her "Spiritual path" about 4 years ago and this has been sensational for her. She has become a vegetarian, does not touch any alcohol, and sex is not high on her list of priorities....however, she is calm, happy and totally obsessed by her guru.

I need socializing in my life; I crave our lovemaking to be here again; and I enjoy eating meat from time to time... I am so worried... I need my "basics." She is at peace with her life... What can I do????? Have an affair??? That will take care of the sex—and perhaps the "going out to fun places"....but...is this right/wrong/normal???? Please tell me what you think. I appreciate your comments.

Peggy's Response:

Although a situation like this goes far beyond the issue of affairs, I assume that the sex/affair factor is a central part; so I will make some general comments.

First of all, it's normal for two people who are part of a couple to choose different areas of focus as their lives progress. So it's normal for the wife to want the things she is now choosing—and it's normal for the husband to want the things he values. It's not the choices per se that cause the feelings of "growing apart;" it's the distance that's created when the choices come without both partners having shared their thoughts and feelings as the changes/choices are being made.

Since there's some truth to the saying that opposites attract, it's quite possible that we would be attracted to someone new who made the choices an old partner is now making. A new person might seem fascinating by virtue of these differences. But the old partner often simply seems different or strange because we're comparing the way they have become to the way they once were. In addition, none of us particularly likes changes not of our own choosing—especially when it means we have to make adjustments to accommodate those changes.

As for the changes related specifically to sex, for women it's often the case that strong feelings of a sexual connection with their partner are closely aligned with feelings of a strong connection/involvement in other, non-sexual aspects of life. (When the overall connection is weak, so is the sexual connection.) Therefore, it's possible that being more involved/connected in other areas of life can rekindle involvement/connections in a sexual way as well. Of course, it takes both people sharing their deepest hopes, fears, and desires to forge this kind of connection. But it might be worth making this kind of effort—especially if the alternative is simply to have an "affair." While an affair may solve one problem, it's almost sure to create others.

Loving Two Women

Question:

I am a very confused man. Married to someone who I love and who accepts me for who I am. I am also in love with another woman, who loves me unconditionally and accepts me for who I am.

I can share so much with both people. I share much more with the other woman. And I don't know why this is. For example, I went to Mexico recently, and ended up in a house of ill repute, paying for a prostitute. I told the other woman about this, but of course I hid it from my wife. I have shared with the other woman many of my past indiscretions, that I hope my wife would never find out about.

My problem is that I have always been looking for something better than what I have. I have always thought I was unhappy. But now I want to stop all of that because I do feel that what I have always been looking for was right in front of my face. And I just never realized it. I just learned this when I went on a trip and spent time with the other woman. Leaving her was difficult, and I realized how lucky I was.

The biggest problem is that I believe that both my wife and the other woman bring to me a complete happiness that I could not have with one or the other. I need both of these women, in the same way: to share, to love physically. For me it seems so possible. I don't want to lose my children, I don't want to lose her. Do I have to make a choice? I know I probably sound very selfish to you. I guess what I am asking is whether it's possible to love two women in the same way? And is it possible to live that kind of life?

Peggy's Response:

The first statement in this letter sets the proper tone for all the rest of it: "I am a very confused man"—so it provides some hope that he can think more rationally than is currently happening.

For instance, the fact that he "shares more with the other woman..." about things he wouldn't share with his wife is quite understandable—and doesn't carry any special significance as to the quality or closeness of the outside relationship. It's always easier (and safer) to share with someone when there's not as much at stake and not as much invested. (If the current other woman were the wife, it's unlikely that he would share with her any more than he shares with his current wife.)

Now, to the specific questions as to whether he can have both these women or whether he has to make a choice: Obviously, people can do a lot of things—if they're willing to disregard the impact on others. Living this kind of life (secretly, deceptively) is quite different from deciding (on a fair and equal basis) to include other significant love partners. Some couples choose to have a sexually open marriage because they jointly decide they want to include others. But more often, people establish two sets of rules: one for their own lifestyle and a different one for their spouse.

If a person truly loves someone, they're unlikely to be willing to benefit at the other's expense. And it's unlikely that this kind of situation could continue for any extended period of time without there being a "price to pay" by one or both women involved. Thinking otherwise is the classic rationalization used when people want to "have it all"—with no consequences. There are very few free rides in life; most significant decisions have consequences. So anyone can have/do whatever they want—as long as they're willing to accept the consequences.

I want both

Question:

One can have extramarital affairs and still love his mate. He may just need more sex than she is willing to give, or the variety of activities that he desires, such as oral sex, or more than two or three times week. I'm tired too, but I have a greater need for sex than my partner does. I like experimentation but she doesn't as much; there's more than missionary and doggie style that helps add variety and excitement to a relationship. If I don't feel too old for more variety and frequency, then why doesn't she? I thought women were supposed to reach their peak at a later age than men? Sex makes me feel young and desired.

Peggy's Response:

This letter covers a *lot* of issues: having affairs and still loving your mate; different needs and desire for frequency and variety; age and sexual potency; and sex helping self-esteem. On the surface, it would look like a simple case of incompatibility, but things are seldom as they appear on the surface. Since many of the issues are ones that other couples face, I'll make some general observations.

First of all, contrary to traditional thinking, it *is* "possible" to love your mate and still want to have affairs. However, if you also value, respect and are *honest* with your mate, then you probably won't *act* on that desire. It's normal to be attracted to others, but acting on the attraction shows a willingness to be dishonest that can lead to all kinds of problems in the marriage, regardless of whether the affair is ever discovered.

As for differences in preferences around sex, sometimes the differences are not really about sex at all. The lack of interest can be due to lots of other factors, most notably a lack of trust or a build-up of resentment over feeling there's some inequity in the relationship. Of course, sex drives do vary; but if a couple genuinely wants to find ways to work through the differences to find a mutually satisfying sex life, it can be done.

Sexual compatibility may not just come naturally, but there's nothing wrong with getting some professional guidance in learning better ways of dealing with different sexual preferences—if the differences really are simply sexual. In fact, this is one of the most straightforward issues to deal with—far simpler than the more complicated feelings of fairness, equality, concern, understanding, and commitment. If those things are present in a relationship, no purely sexual differences will stand in the way of finding a way to satisfy both partner's needs.

Marital crisis

Question:

I am having an affair with another woman, this has been going on for over a year. My wife found out but now thinks it is over with. The other woman thinks I have left my wife. I cannot decide who I love and of course this has led to many problems. I know I am being unfair to all. I just cannot make up my mind as to what to do. I need help in sorting out my feelings.

Peggy's Response:

The above is a classic approach-avoidance situation—which is quite common when people feel unable to make a decision. What happens is that the closer we get to a particular decision, the more we think about what we're giving up by choosing it instead of the alternative. Then when we shift toward the other decision, the same tendency happens again—this time focusing more on what would be lost by giving up the first consideration. It's true in almost all aspects of life that there are tradeoffs. You can't have *everything*; you have to get clarity about what you're willing to give up in order to have something that you want more.

Sometimes an effective way of handling this is to actually make two written lists so the two alternatives can be more easily compared. However, it's important not to assume that the longest list *wins*. It's necessary to weigh the two lists in terms of the *significance* of the items on each list.

If this seems too cold and calculated, another technique is to project 5 or 10 years down the road, envisioning life in terms of each of the two alternatives. Sometimes we get so caught up in the moment that we take a short-sighted view of the situation and fail to account for the more important long term.

Finally, when there's too much of a struggle to decide between two choices, it may be that the choices should not have been limited to those two in the first place—that what's really going on has more to do with some general sense of lack of satisfaction with *either* choice. So this whole process is an opportunity to get to know yourself better and be clearer about the choices you're making—and why you're making them. And no matter what choice results in the end, you're likely to know yourself better by virtue of having been thoughtful in the whole decision-making process.

Affairs are Confusing

Question:

I really wonder if I need to see a psychiatrist. I was involved with another man while I was married. It lasted for a year, but has since ended. But now I am involved with another man (however, we have not had sexual intercourse). I know I must be crazy to take the chances I have taken with my marriage the past 2-3 years. I just don't understand why I can't be satisfied with my husband. He is a wonderful man... that loves me dearly... and treats me like a queen. I have what every other woman wants!! Can you give me any idea why I would take such a chance. I have two kids and have been married 12 years... and now I have to wonder if they are the only reason I stay with him. I really don't believe that... but I'm running out of rational explanations for my behavior. I've always thought that I loved my husband very much... but I just wasn't "in love" with him. As I write this to you now... I feel love for my husband. But... I can't help but wonder if my "love" for him is really something much less.

How can I continue to do this if I love him? Is it possible that my need for excitement... thrills... and the unknown are so much greater than my love for him? Is it possible that I really don't love him at all? Right now I just feel like a self-centered woman... who thinks only of myself. Also, I have noticed that I am much more pleasant... and happy... and content with life when I am involved with another man. And when I'm not, I'm pretty much miserable... and that definitely reflects in my marriage. So...when I'm having an affair... my marriage seems to be reaping the benefits also.

Well... I can go on forever... and I know you can't "diagnose" me or give me a "quick fix" on what little information I've given you. I feel pretty sure my childhood (lack of a father figure) has a lot to do with my behavior... and there are many other factors to consider. My main question is... is this just a phase that I'm going through... like a mid-life crises? Will I ever be happy with just my husband again? Or... will it take some therapy to figure out why I behave the way I do... and if it will continue forever? Or... is it possible that I just don't truly "love" my husband anymore? I know what I'm doing is wrong... and dangerous... so you don't have to give me the third-degree in your response... I feel bad enough about it (when I really think about what I'm doing). Thanks for listening.

Peggy's Response:

While this letter is packed with questions, I'm glad to see that there's a recognition of the fact that neither I (nor *anyone*) can reasonably diagnose such a complex situation. In fact, I'm concerned about her own effort to diagnose herself by trying to identify a label—like mid-life crisis, lack of father figure in childhood, etc. And I'm also concerned about thinking it requires therapy to figure out why she behaves this way.

In fact, there's probably no need to go beyond the insight already expressed: "I'm running out of rational explanations for my behavior." Very little about having secret affairs has to do with rational behavior. Since much of the behavior is based on rationalization, this can be a good starting point for looking at some of the irrational beliefs that might be contributing to the situation:

1. "How can I continue to do this if I love [my husband]?"

Many people assume that if someone loves their spouse, they won't have an affair. That's not necessarily the case—because there are different kinds of love. As I've said repeatedly, the *love* in an affair is different from the love in a long-term relationship. In an affair, there's a first-flush of euphoria that's typical of all new relationships. It doesn't last. That's because love is not static; it changes over time.

2. *"When I'm having an affair... my marriage seems to be reaping the benefits also."*

People having affairs try to find ways to rationalize that their behavior is not only *not* doing harm, but may, in fact, even be benefiting the primary relationship. However, the secretiveness and deception undermine the primary relationship—regardless of whether or not the spouse ever finds out.

3. *"My main question is... is this just a phase that I'm going through... like a mid-life crises?"*

This kind of thinking reflects an attitude based on thinking that our life experiences just "happen to us"—rather than being something we do. Since most people don't feel like they *choose* to have an affair, it's as if it's beyond their control.

In the final analysis, this reader is not really asking these questions because of a lack of *knowing*. She clearly shows that she understands what she's doing (and the risk involved): "when I really think about what I'm doing, I know what I'm doing is wrong...and dangerous." So if she just keeps that thought constantly in her awareness, she can change her behavior. It's only when we suppress our awareness of such realities that we do things we *wish* we weren't doing.

Very Confused

Question:

I'm married, but not happy at all. I have been attracted to a male friend for years and not too long ago we started having an affair. He is not married but has expressed very unhappy feelings about my marriage. He wants me at times, but then he starts thinking and then breaks it off, then the same thing over and over. We spend a great night together. Then he doesn't call or talk to me for days. He doesn't want me to leave my husband for him but he doesn't want me to be married either. Should I just break it off with him even if I do get divorced? Or is it his way of saying he wants me to get divorced?

Peggy's Response:

An unavoidable first reaction to the description of the man above is that he may want the fun without any commitment. While I can't know about this particular situation, it's unlikely that any significant life decision should be made based on what this other man *might* want. There's no indication of serious consideration of her feelings in all this—just what "he wants..." (And unfortunately, she is trying to figure out what *he* wants as well—when the better course of action would be to figure out what *she* wants.)

It's usually smart to make one decision at a time. In a situation like the one above, a woman might better disregard *any* consideration of the other man and *first* determine what she wants regarding her own marriage: Does she want to stay married or get a divorce? If she wants to stay married, then obviously all her energy needs to be focused on making that work. If she wants to get a divorce, then it would make sense to take steps to begin that process.

If there's a decision to divorce, then it's usually wise to think/live/experience life independently before immediately hooking up with someone else. Too many women spend their lives going from one man to the next, hoping to find "The One" who will make them happy. A reasonable course of action for any person is to first learn how to be happy on your own—and *then* seek someone to share your happiness. Otherwise, the grass may always seem greener on the other side—no matter what man (or men) are currently part of your life.

Southern Gentleman

Question:

I have been married for 18 years. This is the first time I have had an affair. My husband is a good provider, father, and sexual partner, so I don't understand the affair myself. I met a southern man and he is so exciting. He compliments me, takes me out dancing, loves to cook together and hardly ever sits around the house. My husband is a couch potato. I know it's wrong but I love the best of both lives. At times I would love to leave my husband and go be with "Mark" but I could never hurt my husband and kids that way. I know I should stop the affair but I love this man and there is no doubt he loves me. He wants to get married. Any advice you could give would be appreciated.

Peggy's Response:

The first thing that strikes me about the above letter is the common statement when someone is having an affair: "I could never hurt my husband and kids..." This is, of course, precisely what is likely to happen. However, most people having affairs are in denial about the very real consequences. Overwhelmingly, people focus most of their attention on the *positive* aspects of the affair—things like those described above: exciting...compliments...dancing...etc.

Speaking of dancing, many women see this as a special treat—one that men sometimes fail to fully appreciate. It's definitely a part of the attraction. For instance, my husband doesn't care for dancing, but he regularly went dancing with the women he had affairs with—because it was all part of the seduction.

It's almost always unreasonable and unfair to compare the attention from a man with whom you're having an affair and the attention from your husband. The nature of an affair (or any new relationship) is not like the long-term, real-life relationship in a marriage. For instance, had the woman above been married to the man in the affair for many years, his behavior would likely be more like her husband's—and if her husband were the new man who had just come into her life, he'd be likely to behave more like the man (or any man) having an affair. It goes with the territory—not dependent upon the particular person.

Having the best of both worlds is a common desire, but almost never possible. It may work in the short term, but be disastrous in the long term. At some point everyone has to make a choice—and live with the consequences of that choice.

To Tell or not To Tell?

(Here are 2 letters before my response.)

Question: (letter #1)

My question is whether to tell or not to tell my husband about the affair I had. It is over now, and although he has seen and felt the impact, it is not known that the affair actually took place. I think the reason for the affair, in part, was the lack of emotional bond between him and me. I guess I am wondering if it is possible to mend my marriage, in the true sense, without hurting him with the knowledge of the affair and without risking a divorce, thus spreading what I see as my own pain to the people that I care about the most.

Question: (letter #2)

I had an affair with one of my husband's friends. Now I feel awful about it. But my husband still does not know. It will never happen again. I love my husband very much and I can't believe I was weak enough to have an affair. Should I be honest and tell my husband or let it go?

Peggy's Response:

Every person must make the decision about "whether or not to tell" for themselves. There are some factors to consider that might not at first be obvious. While there's an understandable caution about the potential risk of telling about an affair, there's also a risk if it's *not* disclosed. In marriages where affairs are kept secret, certain topics of discussion are avoided because the deceiving partner fears being discovered and the other is reluctant to appear suspicious. This causes many relationships to be dominated by dishonesty and deception. It's doubtful that a couple can keep something like this hidden for the rest of their lives without a terrible strain developing. A large part of the high divorce rate may be due to the alienation caused by the dishonesty inherent in affairs, even if the affairs are never confronted. So it may be that there is no escape from the pain, regardless of whether the affair is kept hidden or exposed.

This is not meant to diminish the pain of finding out. But one of the advantages of volunteering the information about an affair instead of waiting until it's unexpectedly discovered is that it allows a degree of preparation that can significantly reduce the pain of finding out. However, the person doing the telling has a responsibility to take steps to increase the likelihood that the disclosure will lead to building a closer relationship rather than tearing it apart. First of all, they need to be motivated by a desire to improve the relationship, not a desire to unload their feelings of guilt. They also need to be prepared to hang in and work through their partner's reactions to the information, regardless of what those reactions may be.

So it's not a simple matter of whether or not to tell. It's a matter of why, when, and how. Perhaps the most responsible course is one that doesn't rule out telling *at some point*, and uses that thinking to consistently improve the honesty and commitment to the relationship in such a way as to make it possible to eventually tell. In the meantime, this will have the benefit of strengthening the relationship, regardless of whether it leads to telling about the affair.

Do I have to tell on myself?

Question #1:

I recently took a business trip with my boss. We were together for 5 days and on the last night, after a night of dinner and drinks, we slept together. We both acknowledged that this would never happen again and decided to keep this to ourselves. Telling my husband will only cause hurtful feelings. Do I have to say anything or can I keep this to myself?

Question #2:

Should you ever tell of an old affair? It's over and in the past; why tell?

Peggy's Response:

Re: Question #1:

While it's important to address the issue of whether or not to tell what has already happened, the more immediate issue to be addressed is understanding the problem involved with *continuing* to add to the secrecy by continuing to work together or see the other person in any ongoing way (albeit not sexual). So before focusing on whether to tell a spouse, it's important to strongly consider the risk/danger/ongoing deception of having *any* contact with the third party.

As for telling, many people assume that if an affair is never disclosed and never discovered, then no harm is done to the marriage. But, of course, the secrecy *does* create ongoing harm. However, telling is not a black-or-white issue. It's more reasonable to think in terms of always working toward telling at some point. Mainly, it's important to reject the idea that you can never tell.

Re: Question #2:

This is similar to the first question—except in this case it's “old news”—not a current situation. Unfortunately, there's a common belief that “if the affair is over and in the past, no harm is done by not telling your spouse about it.” However, all the comments about the damage of secrecy still apply—and the message about whether or not to tell is also the same: never say never!

How much is "too much" to tell?

Question:

I had an affair and my husband found out. I am devastated at hurting him so badly and am really struggling with how much to tell him. How much is too much?

Peggy's Response:

The issue of how much is "too much" is one that can only be determined by the spouse of the person who had an affair. Some people don't want to know a lot of details, but most people DO.

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 20 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.

So 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 more specific information about the need to tell—as well as the responsibility of the spouse to listen in a way that reinforces the honesty.

For more information, including statistical data, about the importance of answering questions and talking through the entire issue, see my "Survey Results" posted on the Website.

Should I be completely honest even if I'm leaving my marriage?

Question:

I reviewed your survey results. I was not surprised about the importance of honesty about an affair to the restoration of trust and long-term success of a marriage. One question that is not addressed in your survey or any other article I have been able to find is this: If I, as the unfaithful partner, do not feel I can commit to restoring my marriage, is it possibly more hurtful to my spouse to be completely honest? That is, is it best for me to just say I want out of the marriage?

Peggy's Response:

It's not completely clear from the above question whether there has been a general admission of the affair without being "completely honest" about it—or whether the affair has not been disclosed. So I'll address the general issue of honesty regarding affairs.

First of all, those of you who are familiar with my work know that I have a strong bias in favor of "responsible honesty." In a situation like this, responsible honesty would be honesty that is neither deliberately hurtful on the one hand nor self-serving on the other.

Focusing only on the fact that the truth may be hurtful fails to appreciate that "not knowing" may be even more hurtful. For instance, even though a person may say their refusal to talk is for their mate's own good, it doesn't help. Also, while they are reluctant to admit it, another reason for not being honest may be that they don't want to deal with their mate's emotional reactions.

While many people genuinely want to protect their partner's feelings, when a person discovers their mate has had an affair (or even suspects it), 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.

Through the years, most people have reported that "nothing is worse than not knowing." Of course, any spouse who does not want complete honesty shouldn't be forced to hear more than they want to know. But they deserve to have the option of deciding for themselves whether they do or don't want this kind of honesty.

Many people would say that not acknowledging the affair (or not sharing other information about the affair) is not technically "lying." However, honesty is far more than just "not lying." Responsible honesty involves "not withholding" relevant information.

This, of course, leads to the specific question raised in this letter as to whether it's relevant to tell of the affair if the marriage is ending anyway. As acknowledged above, it's pretty clear that honesty is essential to rebuilding a marriage, but honesty may also be an essential ingredient for a spouse to "make sense of what's happening in their lives" when an affair leads to divorce.

Basically, it's not a matter of just "to tell or not to tell." It all depends on why you tell, how you tell, etc. For instance: Does the spouse ask questions or want more information/understanding? And do you make it clear when you respond that you're doing so out of respect for their right to know rather than to be hurtful?

Naturally, the end of a marriage is going to be hurtful, no matter what. So the question is which path does more toward diminishing the hurt—knowing a lot about why the marriage is ending or knowing a little and wondering about the rest. Each person must make their own assessment of this; my only caution is to be sure that the decision is based on true compassion for the spouse rather than on personal protection from the possible reaction. It's understandable to be reluctant to acknowledge and have to deal with the full truth, but I tend to believe that responsible honesty demonstrates the highest form of respect—both for yourself and for others.

For those who haven't read the "survey results" referred to in the question, please see the "Partial Results of Survey on Extramarital Affairs" posted on the website.

Am I unconsciously looking for something?

Question:

I observed that men are picking up certain vibrations from me when I look them straight in the eyes. They believe I am evaluating them on a sexual level. It has created me a lot of enemies. Does it mean that I am unconsciously looking for something? I am married but now really troubled by this issue. It is becoming more and more absurd... Please let me know if you ever heard of a case like mine.

Peggy's Response:

I want to focus on some of the issues raised in this question because it's important to understand some of the subtle ways affairs can unintentionally develop. It's extremely common for men to "interpret" eye contact (or any kind of attention) as "sexual signals"—even when it's NOT intended.

Fortunately, the woman who wrote this question has detected the unintended signals that men seem to be getting from her, but many women wind up having affairs because they fail to recognize what's happening. All too often, women are flattered by the attention and enjoy the ego-boost that comes with it, never recognizing what's happening until the situation has gone too far.

While a woman may have no particular interest in a man (and certainly doesn't "want" him in a sexual way), she may nevertheless enjoy the feeling of "being wanted" and inadvertently encourage him to continue "wanting" her. (Women often relish being seen as desirable even though they don't want anything to happen as a result.) But men are more "action-oriented," so when they scan their environment and detect a woman they find attractive, they're likely to look for cues as to whether she might be receptive. Since they're hoping to find a positive receptivity, they're quick to erroneously interpret any direct attention as an open invitation to go further.

In fact, I once heard a story about the animal kingdom that somewhat describes this dynamic. Some male animals (deer, I think) scan their environment, looking for females who display a white tail held high. This is supposedly a "signal" of the female's receptivity. The learning for us human animals is to be cautious about whether or not we're sending any kind of "signal" that might be misinterpreted by men who are actively looking for and hoping to find such signals.

The bottom line is that once you recognize the dynamics, you can cautiously try to avoid behavior that may be interpreted in ways other than you intend. You can't absolutely control others' reactions, but you can have an impact by being more cautious. This may be an uphill battle, given the saturation of the media, advertising, etc., with images of women as sex objects.

Here's an excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth* that provides more perspective on this situation:

Sex for Sale

The commercialization of sex through advertising also contributes to affairs in our society. Women, particularly, are used to sell almost every product on the market. Most ads promoting the good things in life imply that a sexy-looking woman is part of the package, one of the "good things" a man deserves. This constant bombardment of ads depicting women as sex objects makes it very difficult for men to relate to women in any way other than sexual. Overcoming this one-dimensional view of women requires a deliberate effort, and an essential part of changing this perspective is recognizing the subtle but powerful influence of the way advertising promotes the view of women as sex objects.

It's not just "men's magazines" that portray this sexy image of women. The advertising in women's magazines is also quite blatant in its depiction of women as sex objects. As for the

impact of this advertising on women themselves, it provides a constant, subtle pressure to be one of these sexy, desirable women. The constant barrage of flawless models leads most women to feel ugly by comparison. This fits into their fears that their partner will find someone more attractive and have an affair. One of the first things a woman does when she suspects her partner of having an affair is to focus on her own appearance. And advertisers are only too happy to reinforce this insecurity by trying to sell her all the things required to compete with other women.

One impact of this concern about their attractiveness is that it increases the likelihood that a woman will have an affair. Many women see an affair as validation of their attractiveness, serving to bolster their confidence about their appeal and their ability to attract men. One woman confided in me that she'd had several affairs, but had never had orgasms with anyone but her current husband. She hadn't engaged in the affairs for sex, or even for companionship; she did it strictly because she felt better about herself by virtue of having men want her. And by the time they wanted her badly enough, she had sometimes gone too far to feel she could stop them. Unfortunately, this is not an unusual situation.

So living up to the ideal presented in the media for being desirable has a direct impact on many women who take the advertising messages to heart. They invest a lot of time and money in pursuing the images portrayed in the media. Then when they succeed in getting the reaction promised by the ads, they're not prepared to deal with it—and wind up having an affair.

(end of excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*)

What if you don't really know the answer to questions?

Question:

I understand that it is very important to communicate details to the spouse who didn't have the affair and answer his/her questions, but what if the spouse asks a question which you just don't have an answer for or just don't know the answer?

(Note that there is another related question contained in the body of the response below.)

Peggy's Response:

This is a legitimate question, seemingly not aimed at avoiding, but recognizing that sometimes there aren't easy answers. The quick rule of thumb in identifying whether someone won't answer as opposed to whether they can't answer is to identify the nature of the question.

For instance, anyone should be able to answer "factual" questions like "who, what, when, where..." However, it's somewhat more difficult to accurately answer questions about "why." And it's even more difficult to accurately answer questions that explain what you were "thinking" or "feelings" related to the affair.

As most of you who have followed my work know, I'm a great believer in honesty and answering questions. Unfortunately, providing "reasonable, consistent, believable" answers is extremely difficult—because "after-the-fact" people don't always 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...)

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 questions 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. As I've written before, it's the willingness to try to answer all questions as honestly as possible that is most important. Difficulty remembering in no way relieves the necessity of making the effort. It is not a justification for avoiding trying to answer.

However, it's also important to realize that even when people want to be honest, it may be very difficult for them to do so. Even those who are "eventually" honest about everything usually "tell it all" in stages. (I've referred to this pattern as being like peeling layers of an onion!)

Unfortunately, this "one-layer-at-a-time" way of revealing information represents a failure to appreciate that every time some new/additional secret is revealed, it means starting all over with trying to rebuild trust. So the sooner questions are answered and the more thoroughly they are answered, the better for everyone.

At this point, I want to take a moment to share another question I received that illustrates the problem in revealing information in "layers."

As the person who was unfaithful I have a serious problem. Some of my answers were not truthful and/or minimized. I am now scared that my spouse may find out the truth. Do I confess and ruin my trustworthiness yet again, or let a sleeping dog lie?

Frankly, if there are still secrets, it's unlikely that the "dog is really sleeping;" the spouse probably senses (fears?) there is as-yet undisclosed information. So once someone is in the position of the person who wrote this question, they are somewhat "between a rock and a hard place." Either way, it's trouble. As I've written in the past, it's always wise to move "toward" telling. But it's important to take the time to lay the groundwork for additional honesty by first establishing that the purpose of the additional information is specifically to be able to eliminate all secrets and grow closer as a couple. (In other words, the "why" of the additional sharing is very important.) So the bottom line is to gradually moving toward telling. In other words, "Never say never!" (It might help to save a copy of this article to share as a part of the final stages of preparing to tell the whole truth.)

One final comment about the different "types" of questions (facts vs. feelings)... there are times when even the facts can be remembered incorrectly. It's possible, although not as likely, for a person who has had affairs to fail to remember some particular fact that may seem very important to the spouse. For instance, although James diligently tried to answer every single question (of any type) that I asked, he demonstrated that he didn't know the answer to a very basic fact regarding when he began his first affair. He was a whole year off. (He honestly thought it was a year before the actual time.) All he knew was that it began at a professional conference that took place each year around Labor Day.

Here's an excerpt from *Beyond Affairs*:

When James was recalling the events of his first affair he placed the time as September, 1965.

I said, "Are you sure?"

He said, "Well, I think so. I know it was at a convention in New York."

I said, "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."

He said, "I guess that's right. Come to think of it, it would have been the 1966 convention."

(end of excerpt from *Beyond Affairs*)

I had sensed his pulling away from me—no doubt as a result of needing to maintain this new secret. So he honestly didn't know the date. The specific date wasn't important to him, but it was very important to me—because I was trying to "make sense" of the confusing world I had lived in for so long. (Remember how I said earlier that sometimes details are not as important to the person who had an affair as to the spouse.)

One final example of the possibility of "not knowing" the correct answer to a factual question: James also didn't know exactly how many affairs he had. He carefully went over every single incident he could remember, but we never could be sure he remembered or accurately counted them all up. However, it was his crystal clear "willingness to try" to answer every question (even when he didn't remember or there were no clear answers) that made all the difference.

So while you can never be sure all questions have been thoroughly and completely answered, you can be pretty sure about whether or not there has been (and continues to be) a willingness to engage in the discussion and to share as much as possible. When one continues to deliberately hold onto secrets and be unwilling to share information, the spouse usually senses it, meaning there's unlikely to ever be full trust in the future. But when both people have the same information about the affair, it establishes a basis for beginning the process of rebuilding trust.

How can I do the right thing?

Question:

I am the wayward spouse who will be forever seeking forgiveness. I just do not know how to do it without hurting my spouse more. In the spirit of Christmas and the New Year I want to do the right things to help my spouse recover. But where do I start? I always think that my spouse doesn't want to talk about it, but then again, I do not want them to think that I am aloof or do not care. I also have a problem in that I know there are things I should have told my spouse, but didn't.

Peggy's Response:

The end of the year often prompts feelings of wanting to "get your house in order." And the above letter is a clear example of how "unfinished business" regarding an affair can leave *both* people in limbo.

While I admire this person for wanting to do the right thing, I can only provide general guidelines on what this entails. The far more important step that is needed at this point is for the letter-writer to directly ask the *spouse* what they need to recover. It's unwise to assume that the "spouse doesn't want to talk about it." Of course, not *everyone* wants more information, but *most* people do. And it's very likely that the spouse in this instance senses the truth—that "there are things I should have told my spouse, but didn't."

Another important awareness is to realize that even if someone doesn't want to talk at this point, they may not continue to feel that way. (Sometimes there's simply a delay in a person's sense that they can deal with more information at a given time.) So clearly stating your willingness to talk at any time the spouse wants to talk and to answer any questions they may have can go a long way toward helping the recovery.

So the concern expressed in the letter, "I just do not know how to do it without hurting my spouse more," can be greatly diminished by no longer guessing what the spouse needs—and simply asking. It's wise to specifically ask the spouse to tell you what, when and how much they want to talk about this. The mutual guessing as to what the other is thinking can be eliminated by simply making it clear that the spouse is in charge of how this unfolds and that you are willing to abide by whatever the spouse wishes.

In the meantime, every effort can be made to maintain as much honesty and openness as possible about your current actions/behaviors in order to establish a pattern of being a person to be trusted now, regardless of the past. As for seeking forgiveness, it's important that the motivation and the focus for all this work is aimed at the spouse's recovery, not at obtaining forgiveness. In fact, forgiveness is more likely to occur as a by-product of the spouse's recovery than by any other means.

What type of woman am I?

Question:

I'm happily married for 5 years. At my x-mas Party, I danced and flirted with an attractive co-worker most of the night. At some point, we were alone in a hallway. We talked, got close and started to do more than flirt. Before it went too far, I stopped it. I brought up our spouses and his kids, trying to think of why not to do this. What should I do? Do I tell my husband or let it pass? What type of woman am I? How can I get through this and not let it happen again? My co-worker and I feel it was a mistake and will not happen again.

Peggy's Response:

Even when Holidays end, the memories tend to linger on, including the "bad" ones as recalled above. Frankly, while the concept of a gathering of employees to celebrate the holidays may be a good one, all too often it creates problems of various kinds. In fact, the typical "x-mas Party" in relation to a good working relationship reminds me of the way the typical "bachelor party" is so in contrast with the celebration of a "marriage." Both are fraught with potential for mistakes in judgment, leading to a sense of regret.

Before I address the specific questions posed above, I want to share my own painful experience related to office parties. (Please remember that the incident described below happened 35 years ago—and was one of the many painful experiences we had to deal with in working through those years of deception to establish an honest, monogamous marriage.)

The following is an excerpt from *Beyond Affairs*, the book James and I wrote in 1980, describing our own experience. This excerpt contains a section I wrote about my concerns and then James's description of what actually happened.

Peggy:

One situation I dreaded in particular was the office Christmas party James' work group held annually...without spouses. This year it was even worse than usual. We'd planned to go to dinner after the party. He was running so late I began to wonder if we'd still go, but I knew better than to call the office. I never questioned him or checked up on him like that. The wife of one of the other guys did call. Her husband told her he'd be home when he got there and she shouldn't call and bug him. She immediately called me to talk about it. While we didn't admit it to each other, I think we both felt anxious. I imagined all kinds of wild things happening—in keeping with my stereotypes about office parties.

When James finally came home, he'd obviously had a lot to drink. We did go to dinner with two other couples. One of the guys, who'd also been at the party, was so drunk he passed out during dinner. This just reinforced my suspicions about the party being wild.

James:

Yes, Virginia, office Christmas parties are as wild as people say they are—at least some of the time. By Christmas, 1967, I was deep into outside relationships. It was clear that Karen, a woman at the university, was eager to start an affair with me. I was attracted to her, but had resisted becoming involved. I'd seen the complications of work-related and in-town affairs, and I wanted to avoid that.

So there I was at our Christmas bash, feeling good about life and feeling very content to enjoy drinking and dancing. We were a hard-working group and we frequently socialized together, so we got loose rather quickly. Late in the party I found myself in my office with Karen. Honestly, I didn't design this one. As the saying goes, she was all over me. I didn't offer much

resistance. With a couple of drinks (and my brain below my belt), my reasoning went like this. 'There's not much I can do about this—it's inevitable. All the guys in the office already know I cat around and we can probably keep the other women from finding out.' So I took advantage of the opportunity.

I had a vague awareness I was already late to pick up Peggy for a dinner engagement. I figured I could blame my lateness on the office party being slow to break up. After all, I was one of the hosts, and it wouldn't look good if I left early. Of all the crazy things I did in those years, this has to rank close to the top.

(end of excerpt from *Beyond Affairs*)

While the letter-writer did NOT pursue the situation to the degree James did, they both had a typical way of describing how this seemed to "just happen." For instance, the letter-writer said: "At some point, we were alone in a hallway" and James said: "I found myself in my office with Karen." In both instances, it was if they got in the hallway or the office by magic. While alcohol is likely to loosen inhibitions, it also serves as a rationalization to avoid taking responsibility for your actions.

Now...to the specific questions posed in the letter:

"What I should do? Do I tell my husband or let it pass?"

As painful and difficult as it is to tell, it's important to establish an honest relationship in the marriage. This does not mean it's wise to immediately "unload" or "dump" this information on the spouse. But it's also important not to "let it pass." The telling needs to be the result of a process that begins with understanding what's involved in talking honestly about such issues. Start reading these two articles under the "Articles about Affairs" section of the website: Preventing Affairs and How Can Affairs be Prevented? Next, begin a dialogue about how each of you feels about monogamy and your commitment to each other, how you're going to handle attractions and temptations, and how you're going to use those discussions to reinforce your commitment to honesty. Then as a natural evolution of these talks, you can share the experience described in this letter.

"What type of woman am I?"

This question displays the common thinking that "bad people have affairs and good people don't." However, no one is "immune" from affairs; they happen to all kinds of people, in all walks of life. Traditionally our attitude has been that unless it touches us personally, we deal with it by ignoring it, denying it, or condemning it. Unfortunately, this does nothing either to help deter affairs or to deal with their consequences. But informing ourselves about affairs is the best way to prevent them. For more understanding of this issue, see the article under the "Articles about Affairs" section of the website: Who Has Affairs?.

"How can I get through this and not let it happen again?"

You don't get through it by just "thinking" about it or "regretting" it; you need to "do" things to make sure it doesn't happen again—like confiding in someone immediately, even before telling the spouse. That's because "accountability" to someone makes it less likely that anything else will happen.

Also, the final statement in the letter contains a big red flag of danger: "My co-worker and I feel it was a mistake and will not happen again." One of the biggest problems in marriage is when people have a secret with a third party (or a potential third party) that is hidden from the spouse. The very experience of talking with the co-worker about "feeling it was a mistake and not letting it happen again" actually serves to *increase* the connection with the other person through additional secrecy. So it would be strongly advised to seek another job as soon as possible, and until that happens to refrain from any personal conversations of any kind with the co-worker.

Why doesn't he believe me?

Question:

My husband and I confessed to mutual affairs. It has been a year and he still thinks I have not told him everything. I absolutely have. We are on the brink of divorce! What should I do?

Peggy's Response:

This letter provides very little information about a very complex situation. Basically, I suspect there is much more to the situation than simply that the husband doesn't believe she's told him everything. For instance, if he's prepared to divorce about a perceived failure to tell everything (especially given that he had affairs too), there are probably other factors at play.

--It's possible that he hasn't told everything, so is projecting the same behavior onto her.

--It's possible that he's using this accusation as a form of punishment for her having an affair in the first place. (Even men who have had affairs themselves are often harsh in their reaction to learning of their wives affairs.)

--It's possible that he genuinely doesn't believe her for a variety of reasons: maybe he never trusted her very much, maybe he just assumes she did more than she's acknowledging, maybe he doesn't want to believe her because he wants to keep up the pressure and/or keep the turmoil going, etc.

--It's possible that his reasons are a combination of the above.

--It's possible that he doesn't know why he doesn't believe her.

--Finally, it's also possible that he does believe her, but wants a divorce anyway and is using this excuse to justify getting a divorce.

Frankly, when both parties have had affairs it often provides a basis for each person better understanding the feelings of the other. Both understand the excitement/satisfaction of having an affair—and both understand the pain of dealing with their spouse's affair. This joint perspective can be the basis for more effectively working through the fallout from the affairs.

So, as I said in the beginning, there seems to be more involved in this particular situation than the simple question of his failure to believe that she has told him everything. Unless/until she can get to the bottom of all the factors leading to his threat of divorce, she's unlikely to be able to simply convince him of her truthfulness—especially after a year of being truthful.

P.S. All of the above comments are based on assuming that the letter-writer is accurately reporting that she has, in fact, told her husband everything. And since there's little to be gained in falsely reporting this in a question submitted here, I take it at face value that she is reporting the situation accurately insofar as she understands it. It's just that there is clearly more to her husband's reaction than she currently understands. So her primary challenge is to get more information as to why he still says he doesn't believe her.

How can the person who had an affair deal with the guilt she feels?

Question:

I recently found out my wife of 15 years had several affairs. I have forgiven her, but she is having trouble dealing with the guilt. What should she do?

Peggy' Response:

Often the hurt spouse is not the only one who has a difficult time "forgiving." When a person who has had an affair becomes fully aware of the devastation caused by their actions, they may find it extremely difficult to forgive themselves.

They are likely to be gripped by many of the same feelings of loss and regret as their spouse—like thinking "if only..." this hadn't happened. They might say they'd give anything if they could go back and avoid inflicting this kind of pain.

But learning to live with the sense of regret (and guilt) is part of the challenge of dealing with any life crisis. It involves accepting the reality of the fact that life is now different and nothing will change the past. But going beyond that to focus on what they can do now and in the future that may make a difference. Facing the consequences of actions that can not be erased or undone calls for digging deep inside and discovering some way to become better people by virtue of this experience.

So the first step is letting go of "if only..." and looking toward "what can I do to demonstrate that I've learned an important lesson" from this experience. And, further, how can I take this learning and use it to become a better person. No matter how difficult something is to deal with, there's always the potential for learning from it. And using these learnings to forge a more responsible and more fulfilling life can be of great help in counteracting the feelings of guilt or regret.

What can be done by the one who had an affair?

(These two questions address the same issue—from both sides.)

Question #1:

How come everything I find -- books, websites, etc. -- is for me figuring out how to get over it and there doesn't seem to be anything I can send to him so he can know how to help me get over it and trust him again? Why does it all seem to be on me getting over what he did? What can he do to make it better?

Question #2:

I had an affair...How can I help or what can I do for my wife?

Peggy's Response:

Most books and websites do focus on directly addressing the spouse of someone who had an affair—because that's who is usually buying the books or visiting the websites. However, that's not to say that there isn't lots of information pertaining to what needs to be done by the person who had the affair. It's just that the information is not addressed directly to the partner who is not the one reading the material.

Of course, it's much better for the person who had an affair to get information firsthand rather than having their spouse try to "educate" them. So today, I'll take some of the information that I've already included in my writings—and directly address it to the spouse who had an affair. (I hope this will enable you to better help your spouse in recovering.)

1. 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.)

2. 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.

Frankly, few people ever recover without answers. Also, it's much better to answer sooner rather than later. No matter how much progress may be made based on incomplete answers, if/when they get more information later (either from you or from outside sources) it is much worse. In fact, it's like starting over from scratch; you lose whatever progress has been made up to this point.

3. 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.

4. 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.

5. Don't expect your spouse to trust you again for a very long time.

While they 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. This means being "accountable." 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.

6. 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 link on the home page of the website titled "Locate a Therapist" near you.

The above points are by no means complete, but it's 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*.

What can I do about my guilt?

Question:

What can I do about my guilt? I recently had a panic attack because I remembered something horrible I did during my affair that I lied to my husband about. I do not know whether to tell him or not because I do not want him to overreact since we have been doing well as of late, yet he did ask the question. I lied to him and held back information and therefore I am scared if he finds out later the repercussions may be worse to our healing. How should I handle this?

Peggy's Response:

This is a very common problem - in that, frankly, almost no one tells everything in the beginning. While it may be small comfort to know that this behavior is common, the pattern of telling some lies, some partial truths, some half-truths, etc. is almost universal. There's an understandable tendency to "hold back" some of the details that feel like just "too much to tell."

However, through the years the consistent message from those who learn of a spouse's affair is that they want to know everything. When someone does not want to know details, that's a different matter—but when they ask questions, they need/deserve to get answers in order to ever fully recover.

The writer of the above question is wise to recognize the risk/danger in the fact that she "lied to him and held back information...and is scared if he finds out later the repercussions may be worse to our healing." While it's true that there's likely to be a strong reaction to learning about the earlier lie, it's also quite true that the longer the process of telling the truth is drawn out (and the more layers are uncovered over time), the longer it takes to go through the healing process.

So while it's likely to be a temporary set-back to tell the whole truth at this later stage, it's almost sure to be even worse if the truth comes out even later. (I've known instances where the full truth came out 2 to 10 years later—and it set the couple back to ground zero to try to start all over with the recovery/rebuilding process.) But, as I said, failing to reveal the truth may mean the healing is never complete.

So it comes down to making the better of two bad choices. And I would never tell a specific person what they should do in their own particular situation (since there are too many unknown factors in a given relationship). However, in general it's better to tell sooner rather than later—since there's no guarantee that it won't someday come out anyway and be even worse than doing it now.

By "doing it now" I don't mean to imply an impulsive "telling" just to deal with the guilt feelings. (In fact, the reason it's important to tell the whole truth is NOT to "relieve guilt," but out of respect for the other person and their right to know—although telling for the right reason is likely to also help diminish the guilt feelings.) In other words, the reason for telling the truth is primarily in order to establish a deep level of honesty based on caring and wanting to establish a relationship based on fairness and equality.

Not only is it important to be clear about the reason for telling, but it's also important to do some homework/groundwork to prepare for the telling—so as to make it more possible for it to be heard in the spirit in which it's intended. That means going through a careful, deliberate process of reinforcing the fact that you love your spouse, value your marriage, and want to do whatever it takes to rebuild. Only then are you fully prepared to take the next step and tell the truth.

For more on this, see the article under the "Articles about Affairs" section of the website titled "The Need to Know."

What about the feelings of guilt by the person who had an affair?

Question:

We seem to be in a vicious circle. The extreme guilt he feels for having the affair gives him serious doubts about ever returning home. Although he believes I could forgive -- he doesn't 'think' he can forgive himself. The guilt is now serving as an excuse; he's eaten 9/10ths of the loaf of bread, what's one more slice? As long as the guilt serves as an excuse, the affair continues; he doesn't 'think' he could ever come back home - not worthy of my love. Therapy didn't work. What now?

Peggy's Response:

Unfortunately, the actions described above are just the opposite of what's needed to deal with feelings of guilt. That's because the feelings of guilt are unlikely to just "go away" one day, freeing him to 'think' he can come home.

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. By gradually re-establishing intimacy with his wife, the increased feeling of connection and closeness may allow the guilt feelings to recede. But by maintaining distance between him and his wife, he removes this possibility.

There's little the wife or anyone else can do until he is willing to go beyond focusing on what he did in the past to focusing on what he can do in the future. One of the keys to moving on is that when guilt feelings come, you can make a conscious, deliberate effort to focus on what you are doing now and what you can do in the future to learn from the experience and be the kind of person who feels good about themselves based on who they are NOW.

It's important to accept the fact that our actions can not be erased or undone, but that we can dig deep inside and discover some way to become a better person by virtue of this experience. So the first step is to focus on figuring out "what can I do to demonstrate that I've learned an important lesson" from this experience? No matter how difficult something is to deal with, there's always the potential for learning from it—and using these learnings to forge a more responsible and more fulfilling life. This focus and process can be of great help in counteracting the feelings of guilt or regret.

Unfortunately, someone in this position may feel it's hopeless to think they can ever "redeem" themselves. But something like continuing the affair not only doesn't allow for the possibility of moving in this direction, it's likely to lead to feeling even worse about yourself. So if there is a legitimate concern about feelings of "guilt," it's time to stop continuing the behavior that led to the guilt in the first place. Otherwise, it strongly suggests the possibility of the guilt just being an "excuse" to continue the affair.

P.S. It's not what mistakes we make in life that define us; it's how we deal with those mistakes and use them to learn and grow and improve. The "best" people are usually those who have been tested and failed, but then rose to prove themselves anew.

Waiting in limbo and wondering?

(Below are some questions from a couple of spouses and one married person having an affair about the frustration of waiting for someone to make a decision and act on it to end the triangle, along with some of my comments about this kind of situation.)

Question #1:

My husband has been involved in an affair for about 15 months and lives alone (not with her - it's a long-distance relationship) in an apartment not far from our house. He visits regularly and we talk some. I've asked for more time together but he says when he's with me he feels that he's cheating on her and when he's with her he's cheating on me. He does not want to give her up nor does he want to give up everything else. It's an impossible situation; what would you suggest?

Question #2:

My husband of many years, engaged in an affair almost 2 years, seems to be in the approach-avoidance stage, which I understand might last until he is forced to choose. Do you think I should ban him from our home and stop all unnecessary communication as opposed to giving an ultimatum? I've been trying to be passive/neutral when he visits. My concern is if I stop everything altogether, he will feel totally pushed away, which is not the outcome I desire. I need an objective opinion.

Question #3:

It has been 4 1/2 years. We are both married. We are both miserable. All the facts point to being divorced besides having the affair. I am ready. He is so weak. There is always some circumstance that arises. Could it be that he is just holding on for fear that I will tell his wife?

Peggy's Response:

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).

As is clear from Question #3 above, the third party is also in limbo. They often wait (and hope), sometimes for years, but the relationship almost always leads to a dead-end. Overwhelmingly, an affair does not lead to divorce; and when there is a divorce, in most cases it does not lead to marrying the third party. (Even if it were to eventually lead to marriage, second marriages have an even higher divorce rate than first marriages, so the chances for a long-term relationship that began as an affair is extremely small.)

So it's unwise for the other woman to put her life "on hold" without a clear-cut time frame. Frankly, it's smart for the other woman to go ahead and end the affair—sooner rather than later. This doesn't necessarily mean that the marriage will be rebuilt. But it does set up a two-stage decision-making process that moves the process along rather than leaving everyone stuck.

Of course, it's important to make every effort to get the "man in the middle" (in situations like the above) to recognize just how unfair this uncertainty is to both women—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.

What's the worst that can happen?

Question:

I'm very unhappy in my marriage and am strongly considering an affair. I feel I need this for me and don't see how it could hurt. What's the worst that can happen?

Peggy's Response:

I am aware of some true horror stories about "the worst that can happen," but since they don't represent what normally happens in affairs, I haven't shared them in this column. However, upon receiving the above question, I decided that it's probably wise to be aware of what CAN happen in extreme circumstances.

I have been granted permission to share these stories if I thought it would help someone (especially if they're considering an affair). So here are 3 short, sad stories that should cause anyone to stop and think more seriously about the possible ramifications of embarking on an affair:

True Horror Story #1: A man (an executive that traveled quite a bit) started an affair with a woman that he apparently planned to leave his wife for, and marry. When he confronted his wife, the resulting uproar convinced him to reconsider (plus, there were four young kids at home that he would have 'lost' in the resulting divorce). When he tried to break off the affair, his lover became so distraught that she shot him. He left a bitter widow and 4 fatherless kids. The youngest son has no memory of his father, except as a cheater who paid the ultimate price. Very sad for everyone, especially since it was the only legacy the man left. (This story about the father was shared with me by one of his children.)

True Horror Story #2: A man who was a prominent politician in a large Southern city had numerous affairs. His last lover was convinced that he would divorce his wife and marry her. When the lover finally realized he never intended to do that, she actually hired a distant relative to shoot the wife in her own home. The shock of the murder gave the husband a massive coronary. He lingered for 4 months, then died, bedridden and broken, leaving 3 children (one a young adult and the other 2 teens) orphaned.

True Horror Story #3: A police officer suspected his wife of having an online affair, which was correct. Her Internet lover was pressing her to meet him when the husband discovered the incriminating emails. She panicked, and fatally shot herself.

Note: While these stories sound too bizarre to be true, more like a movie (remember "Fatal Attraction!"), they are real-life stories that are part of public record. I share them in case somewhere down the road they could help save a life.

Can you be addicted to your spouse?

Question:

I'm happily married for 5 years. At my x-mas Party, I danced and flirted with an attractive co-worker most of the night. At some point, we were alone in a hallway. We talked, got close and started to do more than flirt. Before it went too far, I stopped it. I brought up our spouses and his kids, trying to think of why not to do this. What should I do? Do I tell my husband or let it pass? What type of woman am I? How can I get through this and not let it happen again? My co-worker and I feel it was a mistake and will not happen again.

Peggy's Response:

I have a lot of trouble with the degree to which the word addicted is used to describe many situations that are actually quite understandable. For instance, virtually every relationship displays some of this "avoidance/pursuer" dynamic when one person has had an affair (and doesn't want to talk about it) and the other person needs to have their questions answered.

It's unlikely you would be in an "avoidance/pursuer relationship" if your spouse weren't avoiding doing the things that are needed to reassure you about the eventual success of your effort to stay married. These include severing contact with the third party, answering all your questions, and hanging in through the inevitable time it takes to talk through everything—usually at least two years. (The writer doesn't indicate how long it's been since the affair ended, but if it's less than two years, it's almost certain that there has not yet been full personal recovery, much less a rebuilding of the full connection in the marriage.)

So rather than thinking you've "done something wrong," it seems that your reaction is completely normal—and that if anyone has "done something wrong" it's your spouse, by having an affair in the first place. When someone discovers their spouse has had an affair, they're likely to feel uneasy and unsure and to want/need more responsiveness and accountability from the one who had an affair. If the spouse "avoids" this responsiveness and accountability, then the hurt spouse will almost certainly "pursue" in trying to get what they need (and deserve to have) in order to recover.

Unfortunately, the longer it takes for the one who had an affair to come around to doing everything their partner needs to recover, the more likely this dynamic will continue. But rather than call it an "avoidance/pursuer" situation, I see it more as a "one-up/one-down" situation. That's because when someone fails to provide what is needed, they set themselves up to be in a "on-up" position in the relationship—leaving the other partner in the "one-down" position. This kind of situation is not good for either person. So if the one who had an affair wants to stop being pursued, they can simply stop avoiding what they need to do to help their partner recover.

Disclaimer: IF the one who had an affair is, in fact, doing all the things listed above (answering questions and working through the whole situation, thus demonstrating responsiveness and accountability)—but the spouse is still "pursuing," then the spouse might be "doing something wrong." But unless/until that time comes, the only thing wrong is the behavior of the one who had the affair.

So the writer of this letter need not be self-critical; if anyone is responsible for the "avoidance/pursuer" relationship, it's the avoider, not the pursuer.

Husband keeping total tabs on me?

Question:

I am the wife. My husband and I have been married almost 21 years; we are both in our young 40's. I had the affair, for 18 months. It's confessed and over by approximately 6 weeks now, but my husband is insisting on keeping total tabs on me. I must call from the house phone before I leave for work, I must call him from the work phone when I get there, repeat when I leave work. I can't go anywhere without him! I am under 24-hour watch. Is this healthy?

Peggy's Response:

While it may be frustrating to be so closely checked up on, it's quite normal and understandable. In fact, 6 weeks is an incredibly short time, so this behavior is not unusual. It's really not a matter of whether or not it's "healthy," since nothing about having an affair is healthy—for anyone. It's just that these are some of the normal ramifications of so completely destroying your spouse's ability to trust you.

It's tempting to think that there should be no ramifications or consequences, but that's just unrealistic. (For instance, it's not too unlike the way the criminal justice system imposes constant "monitoring" of someone who has done something to demonstrate they can't be trusted.) Certainly, something as devastating as an affair is disruptive to any normal existence for quite some time. And hoping or pretending otherwise is useless.

So rebelling against his need for you to "report in" won't make the need go away. In fact, the more you resist, the more he's likely to feel that his concerns about your trustworthiness are valid. But the more cooperative you are in earning back his 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 he needs to feel reassured, the less he is likely to feel anxious, thus the less he is 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. As I've repeatedly pointed out... even when doing everything possible to rebuild trust, it takes about 2 years for most people to recover from the emotional impact of a spouse's affairs to the point where they can really trust again.

If you do everything possible to reassure your husband for a couple of years and he still insists 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 after 6 weeks, 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.

How can I help her see there is hope?

Question:

I had an affair & live apart from my wife who is divorcing me. My question is how can I get her to see that through counseling & honest communication, we can get through this & make a better relationship for ourselves & our 3 children. How does one get to the person suffering the pain to help them see that there is hope? I am frustrated because she will not see that we can put our marriage back together. It has been 3 months since she filed for divorce.

Peggy's Response:

When viewing this situation from the perspective of the person who wrote the above letter, it's understandable that there is a great deal of frustration at not being able to get his wife to see there is still hope. That's because *he* still feels there is hope, based on knowing that he is prepared to do whatever possible (counseling & honest communication) to rebuild the marriage.

But it's equally understandable for the wife in this kind of situation *not* to see this hope—because of the pain of facing what truly feels like a "life-altering" experience. From her perspective, it's likely that she feels her world has been turned upside down: that her husband wasn't who she thought he was, her marriage wasn't what she thought it was—in essence, her "world" was not what she thought it was.

This can be so overwhelming that it feels like there is *no* hope. Unfortunately, that way of thinking can become a "self-fulfilling prophesy"—in that if you don't think it's possible to rebuild the marriage, then you fail to take the steps that might make it possible. (There's a feeling of "why pursue something that won't work anyway?")

During this period of initial emotional devastation, a person is really in no position to be capable of making a clear, rational decision about whether to stay married or get a divorce. That's why it's so important not to make *any* decision until you've gotten past the initial shock of the situation. As long as a person is still having trouble accepting the reality that this has actually happened, they're likely to be so caught in feelings of "if only..." or "why me..." that they can't think clearly about the possibilities for the future.

So it can be helpful for a person in the position of the man who wrote this question to realize that the biggest factor in allowing her to see that there might be hope is in getting her to allow more *time* before making a final decision. (Initially, a person in the position of the wife above knows only pain.) If there is any way to slow down the divorce process to allow more time—and use that time to consistently demonstrate a willingness to do whatever necessary to rebuild—this *might* allow for a more thoughtful decision to be made.

One way of explaining how it's preferable to delay the divorce is to point out that it's not just *what* decision is ultimately made—but *how* and *when* that decision is made—that determines how well a person actually *lives* with the decision. A hasty decision is often much more difficult to live with—because it leaves lingering questions of "what if..." On the other hand, taking more time before making a decision has a better chance of allowing both parties to go on with their lives without second-guessing the decision, whatever it happens to be. And, in the meantime, a genuine effort to see whether it's possible to rebuild the marriage just *may* lead to that being the final decision. In either case, the decision is likely to be a "better" one than *any* decision that is made in haste without carefully considering everything in a more careful way.

For some guidelines in deciding whether to stay married or get a divorce, see the chapter titled The Marriage/Divorce Dilemma in *The Monogamy Myth*.

Continuing contact with the third party?

Question #1:

Sorry to sound like an idiot, but please spell it out for me as to why I must sever all contact with my x-lover? Neither of our spouses ever found out about our 12-month affair which has been over for 9 months. We were very significant in each other's lives. We promised to remain social friends. Why do you say that shouldn't happen?

Question #2:

My husband still wants to have contact with the other woman on a friendly basis. He says he loves me, but he loves her too in a different way. How do I cope with this? She is married also and will not leave her husband? She has told my husband she now only wants friendship from him.

Peggy's Response:

These two questions represent different situations: one where the spouse knows of the affair—and one where the spouse (supposedly) does not know. As I've often written, severing all contact with the third party (with the exception of times when it's a relative or there's a child from the affair) is one of the keys to recovery and rebuilding the marriage. And this is true regardless of whether or not the spouse knows about the affair.

But I'll address the two questions separately:

1. The first question above does not sound like an idiot speaking. In fact, it sounds like an intelligent person who is simply applying the powers of rationalization to a situation to make it fit their needs/wants. (We all do this kind of thing on a regular basis.)

However, 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. (And if there is ongoing contact with the third party, it's even more difficult and painful.)

It's false to assume that just because there's never been a confrontation or an acknowledgement of this situation 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.")

Even if the spouse really doesn't "know" or suspect the affair, here are some likely impacts of continuing contact:

--The "shared secret" forms a closer, more intimate connection between the two than any normal social relationship would have.

--The continuing contact increases the possibility that the affair may someday be exposed (which could be quite negative) rather than disclosed (which, as described below) could be a positive step.

--The ongoing contact makes it less likely that the day might eventually come when there would be a decision to tell the spouse about the affair, thus ending the dishonesty and deception that prevents couples from being as close as they could otherwise become. Most people who have had an affair live by the mantra of "never tell," but a better commitment is to "never say never" and to always work 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.

--In the long run, ongoing contact is not healthy for the two who were involved in the affair. It prevents them from fully putting this experience behind them and going on with their lives.

2. Now to turn our attention to the second question above:

The writer of the second question seems to accept that it's her job to "cope with" her husband's continued contact with the third party as a friend. It's up to each person to decide for themselves what they are willing to try to cope with. I would never tell anyone to issue an ultimatum—since it can sometimes take a little time for people to "come to their senses." But I would encourage everyone to make it clear to their partner that they do NOT "accept" this as being OK. They may "tolerate" it on a temporary basis, but not as a way of life.

So let me offer some specific points as to why it's legitimate to continue to work toward getting the spouse to sever contact rather than trying to cope with it—because it's not the kind of thing that can reasonably be "coped with." As I've repeatedly observed, severing contact with the third party is one of the essential keys to recovery and rebuilding a marriage. What the other woman "wants" (friendship) does not compare with what the marriage "needs and deserves" if the marriage is to continue.

The reasons to sever contact are many, not the least of which is the ongoing pain it causes the spouse. One of the most effective ways to compound, extend, complicate, rub in the raw painful emotions for the spouse is to maintain contact with the third party. So severing contact is first and foremost about avoiding making the spouse's pain any worse or long-lasting that it already is.

The one who has had an affair (and wants to maintain some kind of contact with the third party) is failing to respect their responsibility for doing whatever is needed to make their spouse feel better—not to make themselves or their affair-partner feel better. While it may seem unnecessary (or even harsh) to sever contact, this is just part of the process of dealing with the fallout from an affair. It's unreasonable to think (hope?) that such consequences can be avoided. The reality is that everyone gets hurt in affairs—not just the spouse. And severing contact is one of the ways that those who engaged in the affair may be hurt.

Of course, even once this is finally understood, there's often an attempt to rationalize that it should be OK to continue contact on a "friendship" or "platonic" basis. But this simply doesn't work if the marriage is to be rebuilt. Contact of any kind is a constant reminder of the affair and keeps the emotional wound raw—like continually scratching the scab off a sore so it can't heal. In fact, the willingness of the one who had an affair to continue contact against the wishes of the spouse feels like they care more about the feelings of the affair-partner than about the spouse, which also deters any real healing and rebuilding of the marriage.

So continuing contact is in some ways even more hard-hearted and cruel than during the affair itself—because now they are showing a willingness to "deliberately" cause this hurt to the spouse. At least when they were having the affair, they were likely to have been "ignoring or denying" the possibility of the spouse finding out and experiencing the hurt that they can now clearly see.

I want to close by addressing the statement made in question #2 that "He says he loves me, but he loves her too in a different way." Yes, the kind of "in love" feelings in an affair is completely different from the "love" of a long-term committed relationship. The "in love" feelings are based on the newness/fantasy situation—and do not last. (Most affairs last between 6 months and 2 years, when this newness wears off and reality sets in.)

The "love" for an affair-partner is simply the first-stage, 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. For more understanding of "The Changing Nature of Love," I hope you will read the section with this title that is contained in our book Making Love Stay. (This section is in the first chapter, posted here on the website, immediately following the Table of Contents.)

Moving on after having an affair?

Question:

I was involved with a married man, my first online affair. I was married also. My hubby and I separated and I started dating this other man. He left his wife. We dated for over 4 months after he left home and started a life together. Planned on moving in...we both had a daughter. He said he loved me as no other and I trusted him sooo much. He left me, dating someone else, moved in with her. I'm trying to get past it and move on. Please help me. And how do I move past all the betrayal and understand it all?

Peggy's Response:

First of all, I want to point out that the above scenario is incredibly typical of what happens in "online affairs." There's a fantasy quality that leads people to get swept up and swept along in this bubble of unreality. I encourage everyone to read (or re-read) the typical scenario of Online Affairs posted under the Articles about Affairs on my website.

The way the situation concluded for the writer of the above question is precisely as I list in point #5 of the scenario describing Online Affairs :

- Your life has been changed in ways you never intended.
- Your online relationship ends—and your "real" one may end as well.

Women are especially susceptible to getting caught up in an online affair. Many men who make such connections online see it as a sidelight or some fun, often forming connections with multiple women, often at the same time. But women are often blindsided by thinking the connection is "real" or "meaningful."

Part of this is because they need to believe it's meaningful in order to feel justified in pursuing it. Among the respondents to my Survey on Online Affairs, 70% were women, and 79% said they were *not* actively seeking an online affair. But this does not prevent it from happening to them, partly because of this naïve belief that it's something special.

I trust that the above question is a genuine expression of pain over what has happened, so I don't want to take it lightly. (And I'll address some of the possible ways to "get past it and move" on later.) But first, I need to focus on the very last sentence..."And how do I move past all the betrayal and understand it all?"

It appears that the betrayal being referred to is the betrayal the writer of this question felt at being dumped by the new boyfriend—*not* her betrayal of her husband. Since she's currently in such pain, it's understandable that she might feel this way. But one of the first ways to deal with the betrayal she is feeling is to recognize that her husband is likely to be feeling even more pain from his sense of betrayal by her.

I am not one of those people who believe that "what goes around comes around." Life is not anywhere near that neat and tidy—as clearly described in the wonderful book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. However, it might help her deal with her own pain if she at least recognizes that her husband was not responsible for her betrayal of him, but that she played an active role in setting up the situation for being betrayed herself.

I don't want to close without pointing out that I am using the word betrayal because this is the specific nature of the question, but I normally avoid using any of these "loaded" words because they only make all painful emotions feel even worse. (For more on this, see the Article on the website titled: "Loaded Words Make it Worse.")

Finally, what can a person who has come to this point do to get past it...

They need to first accept the fact that it was not what they thought it was—so you can't lose what you never really had. Even though the pain of the loss may feel real...the loss is of an illusion, not a reality.

So the best way to "move on" is to use this as a learning experience to be a more responsible, realistic person in your dealings with everyone you encounter as you go through life. In fact, this letter-writer has already inadvertently done something positive simply by sharing her story in that it may help others avoid going down the same dead-end path to pain for everyone involved.

Should I tell him about my affair?

Question:

I had a one-time affair that is over, but I feel terrible guilt about it and really want to tell my husband. However, everyone seems to think it's best to just be quiet and confess to a friend or counselor. What should I do?

Peggy's Response:

The "common wisdom" among most people is that if an affair is over and won't happen again, that you shouldn't tell your spouse. In fact, many counselors also share this view. But most people are only considering the obvious problems with telling—failing to also recognize the problems in NOT telling.

There is no short answer to this question. (Frankly, it's not a simple matter of "to tell or not to tell." It's more a case of "when, why and how" to tell.)

Since I addressed this issue in some length in my book...

the rest of this response is an excerpt from "The Monogamy Myth:"

The advice most people offer to a person considering telling their spouse about their affair is, "Don't." The experience James had when he decided to tell me about his affairs is fairly typical. When he confided his intentions to a friend, the friend's response was to plead with him not to do it. ... The friend's warning was in keeping with the general belief in secrecy when dealing with affairs.

Surprisingly, this attitude of secrecy is reinforced by the standard advice from marriage counselors, therapists, and advice columnists. Many of them are adamant in their belief that a person shouldn't tell their partner about an affair...

The caution against the risk of telling about an affair ignores the fact that there's also a risk if it's not disclosed. In marriages where affairs are kept secret, certain topics of discussion are avoided because the deceiving partner fears being discovered and the other is reluctant to appear suspicious. This causes many relationships to be dominated by dishonesty and deception. It's doubtful that a couple can keep something like this hidden for the rest of their lives without a terrible strain developing. A large part of the high divorce rate may be due to the alienation caused by the dishonesty inherent in affairs, even if the affairs are never confronted.

So 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. And even if the marriage doesn't end in divorce, it's likely to become empty and meaningless because of so much secrecy. It may be that there is no escape from the pain, regardless of whether the affairs are kept hidden or exposed. Often it's just a matter of time before either the marriage became a pretense or the truth comes out, along with the pain it brings.

This is not meant to diminish the pain of finding out. But one of the advantages of volunteering the information about an affair instead of waiting until it's unexpectedly discovered is that it allows a degree of preparation that can significantly reduce the pain of finding out. The person doing the telling has a responsibility to take steps to increase the likelihood that the disclosure will lead to building a closer relationship rather than tearing it apart.

First of all, they need to be motivated by a desire to improve the relationship, not a desire to unload their feelings of guilt. They also need to be prepared to hang in and work through their partner's reactions to the information, regardless of what those reactions may be. And it's

important that they plan the timing of their disclosure of an affair. They need to consider such things as their partner's general level of self-esteem, what other issues or pressures their partner is currently dealing with, and whether their partner has a clear understanding that they are loved. The first task of the person who plans to disclose an affair is to attend to these needs of their partner to be able to hear what they have to say.

Perhaps the most critical factor in determining the impact of this disclosure is having an understanding of affairs in the context of society as a whole. For instance, if a person is told of their mate's affair—and they see it only as a personal reflection on them and strictly as a personal failure on the part of their mate—they're likely to feel the devastation that has been so typical of this situation.

However, if a person is told of their mate's affair—and they recognize it is not a reflection on them personally and that their mate is not solely responsible for its happening—they're much more likely to be able to hear it and deal with it in a way that leads to improving their lives in the long run.

As more professionals include this societal perspective in their work with couples seeking their help, they may be more inclined to encourage responsible disclosure as a way of working toward building a relationship based on honesty. There are indications that some therapists have come to believe in the need to overcome our secretive way of dealing with affairs. One therapist who supports the importance of honesty is Frank Pittman, author of "Private Lies."

Another professional who has written extensively about the importance of honesty is John Powell. In his book, "The Secret of Staying in Love," he makes a compelling argument for honesty as the basis for achieving the kind of relationship most people want.

"Some say that you cannot be totally open and honest with those you love. It would destroy them. These people say that we need only to be real in the part of ourselves that we do reveal. I do not believe this."

"Each person must make a fundamental judgment about the stability, the depth of understanding and acceptance in the relationship involved. The presumption is that these communications should either be made now, or, if that would seem imprudent, then the revelation should be made at some time in the future when the necessary depth of understanding and acceptance have been achieved. Permanent withholding will always be a permanent deficiency in the relationship, an obstacle to the love that could have been."

Unfortunately, most professionals who discourage disclosure of an affair also discourage too much discussion once an affair is discovered.

(end of excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*)

When you have an affair with your first love?

Question#1:

I reunited with my first love last year and I found that or I believed that I still loved him crazily. But both of us got married with kids, he promised me nothing but requested me as his sex slave... I am in great sorrow because of my conscience and morality. Right now, I find that I am in mess and my problems definitely influence my life (both study and work). I try to escape my problem and waste my time on getting his mails. How silly I am to build a castle in the air!

Question #2:

I have been married to the same man for 38 years; 37 of those years I was completely faithful and never interested in another man. Then the unimaginable happened. I developed an on-line relationship with a man who I almost married before my husband...that relationship led to an affair. The affair is mostly over, and I'm still trying to understand my actions and the devastation I feel from what I did to myself and my husband, but ALSO from the loss of the love of this other man. Any help for me?

Peggy's Response:

Young love makes an indelible imprint on us, and it's tempting to wish to turn back the clock. The "first love" is special precisely because it's first. But many people maintain a fantasy image of that special first love and elevate it to some mystical place of perfection.

I wound up marrying my first love—and after 50 years, we're still married. And while the couple we were as teenagers remains a special memory, we have changed dramatically over time—through pain and pleasure and kids and affairs.... In fact, in some ways it's hard to look back and recognize that we're even the same people.

Yes, there is a special magic about first love—whether we stay together or part. If couples stay together, they find that those feelings of new love can't be sustained through the years. But if people do not stay together—yet come back together later (as in the above letters), they may kind of pick up where they left off in feeling how special this love is.

However, this specialness is being created by the "first flush" of reunited 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." 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 experience of first love for what it represented in our lives, 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. 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) to intrude on the present in such a way as to jeopardize the lives we have now.

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. Unfortunately, we have this notion that love is 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 it's important to go beyond focusing only on the positive memories of the early days without also focusing on the reality that you're not the same people and this special "reunited love" does not last. Life has many twists and turns, and the older we get, the more we realize that it's very hard to predict what the future may hold. It's more important to protect and preserve what's good about the lives we have built through the years rather than trying to go back and relive our youth.

I encourage you to visit our other website (LifeDesign101.com) and take a look at James's slide show for the week of May 30, 2005, titled "Reflections On 50 Years of Love."

And for a couple of Articles posted permanently on the DearPeggy site, check under the Articles about Marriage & Family section for the ones titled "The Changing Nature of Love" and "The Full Monty."

What if the pastor has an affair?

Question #1:

What should you do if the person your spouse has the affair with is the pastor of your church? I see many responses for going to the pastor for help in marital problems and would suggest maybe someone different.

Peggy's Response:

Naturally, you would not knowingly go to the "third party" for help—regardless of whether they were a member of the clergy (or a counselor or social worker, etc.) However, the above suggestion to "go to someone different for help" would only apply in a situation where the pastor was known to have had an affair (whether with your spouse or anyone else). But you can never know when choosing a counselor of any kind whether or not they have had an affair themselves. So this should not prevent you from seeking help.

The best you can do is to try to find help from a professional who is effective in dealing with affairs—and that varies greatly. Good professional help can be invaluable, while bad professional help can make things even worse. So it's important to be proactive in identifying the best help possible. For a list of some effective therapists, see the list for "Locating a Therapist" posted on my website . I also encourage you to read the brief overview I have posted with some of the Results from my Survey on Affairs titled "Help for Therapists and their Clients in dealing with affairs."

Like anyone in the helping profession, some clergy are good at helping those who are struggling to deal with a spouse's affair—and others are not. So it's good to assess the quality of the help you receive from anyone to whom you go for guidance. For instance, one basic piece of advice that one often hears (perhaps especially from the clergy) is to keep quiet, not tell anyone, just pray about it, just forgive and go on, etc.—none of which is effective in helping people recover. Also, (since some people feel embarrassed or unworthy to attend services), it's important that clergy allow people to feel "safe and comfortable" to continue their religious involvement while they are dealing with an affair.

But back to the issue of affairs among the clergy...

I have often written that "No one is immune; anyone is vulnerable," and the fact that this also happens to pastors is a vivid illustration of this unfortunate fact. Unfortunately, this is far more prevalent than most people realize. Much of the time it's kept secret and is not known by most people (as is true of most affairs conducted by anyone, but perhaps even moreso with the clergy). However, as more spouses of clergy reach out for help, there is likely to be a greater awareness of the fact that affairs can and do happen to all kinds of people in all walks of life.

For instance, in just one of the local BAN groups, a total of 6 spouses of clergy attended during just one year. And this is not an isolated situation. And Dave Carder, a faith-based counselor (and author of "Torn Asunder") relates in his workshops how he has personally tried to intervene to help spouses of pastors in two different situations in two different churches. (See my Reviews of Books on Affairs for more on this book.)

This question serves as a reminder to everyone that this often happens just when and where it is least expected. Just because you are a member of the clergy—or are in a "good" marriage—or any other scenario you might consider... affairs are extremely prevalent. So it's important for everyone to appreciate that if you haven't yet been touched by this issue, it's likely that you will.

Even if it doesn't happen to you personally, it may happen to a friend or family member; so it's wise to be as informed as possible in advance. I encourage you to read a brief overview of some of

the key issues related to affairs that I have posted on my website. It is listed at the top of the page of Articles about Affairs, titled: "Affairs 101: Educating yourself about this complex issue."

Is it common for a pastor to have an affair?

Question:

My male pastor has a secret Internet female friend. They never meet, but the pastor's wife does not know about this relationship. And this female Internet friend knows he is a pastor. Will my pastor do this to his wife? Is this common?

Peggy's Response:

First of all, this question appears to be about a "nonsexual" relationship, which may seem to be less significant. However the writer is right to be concerned—because the seriousness is inherent in the fact that "the pastor's wife does not know about this relationship." As I have written in the past, many "emotional affairs" wind up becoming sexual. And even if they don't, the damage is done by the secrecy. See the article on the website titled: "Emotional Affairs."

Regarding pastors having affairs...

As much as we would like to believe otherwise, no one is immune to the possibility of having an affair. And failing to recognize this makes someone even more vulnerable—because they fail to be on guard against the possibility of innocently getting "too close" to someone, then gradually going over the line into inappropriate behavior. (While this doesn't appear to be the case in the situation described in this instance... the close, trusting, confidential relationships of pastors with those they serve can lead to unplanned and unintended consequences.)

While a man who is also a pastor seems an unlikely candidate for this path, it's far more common than most people think. In fact, the BAN Support Groups provide a clear example of the prevalence of pastors having affairs; one of the BAN group has had 6 members during the past year who are married to pastors who had an affair. (Affairs happen to people of all religions or no religion.)

In fact, affairs happen to all kinds of people in all walks of life. Below are some of the many false assumptions we hold about who will or won't have an affair... excerpted from *The Monogamy Myth*:

Rationalizations Based on Myths and Stereotypes

"One of the reasons people don't trust the first signals of an affair is because they conflict with many of the myths and stereotypes they've accepted about who's at risk for having an affair. There's a tendency to think affairs happen only to certain kinds of people. Following are a few of the false assumptions we make about who will and who won't have an affair.

She won't have an affair if she's a devoted mother (and therefore wouldn't do anything that might hurt the kids). Being devoted to the kids doesn't preclude having an affair. In fact, many women (who might otherwise divorce) stay married "for the sake of the kids"-and have an affair on the side.

He won't have an affair if he has strong religious convictions. I vividly recall one woman's anguish as being particularly severe as she described finding out about her husband's affair. "He was a pillar of society, big church man, never did anything wrong. I've been devastated." Her shock was even greater because of having assumed he was not vulnerable.

She won't have an affair if she's not particularly attractive. Since people generally look more attractive to a new person (and sexual interest tends to heighten people's attractiveness) this is a very poor rationale. In fact, if a spouse doesn't find their mate attractive (and a stranger does), it may make it even more likely that an "unattractive" person will have an affair than a more secure, "attractive" one.

Affairs happen only within a few specific professions. Many people feel safe as long as their spouse is not in a "glamorous" profession that has traditionally been associated with affairs, such as being an actor, a musician, or a sports figure. This is the attitude of those who see affairs as a problem exclusive to people who work in a unique professional environment. But affairs affect people from all walks of life, not just those with high visibility.

Affairs happen only among people who travel. This is closely related to the previous stereotype about affairs happening only in certain professions. Salesmen, truckers, professional athletes, and others who travel extensively are considered prime candidates, and those whose spouses don't fit that profile breathe a sigh of relief. Fewer women's jobs call for travel than men's, but many men are adamant about their wives not traveling, because they believe this is the best way to prevent them from having an affair. While traveling may make them easier to hide, affairs are certainly not restricted to those who travel.

Affairs happen only among the rich or powerful. Some people have been misled by hearing of so many well-known people having affairs; they begin to think of affairs as relegated to people with special opportunities by virtue of their money or prestige. As long as their spouse isn't a business tycoon or a politician, they think they're relatively safe. This, however, is another false stereotype based on efforts to categorize people who have affairs.

Most of us actually know very little about the subject of affairs. What we think we know is made up of myths and stereotypes that often bear little resemblance to the actual facts of the situation. Since there has been so little clear thinking about this issue prior to facing it and since it's extremely difficult to think clearly in the midst of such emotional turmoil, most people fall back on these stereotypes when trying to cope with their fears. This only contributes to their tendency to rationalize their concerns and to keep their partners from knowing of their suspicions.

(end of excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*)

For many years, we have held certain stereotypes about who will (and who won't) have an affair. We have felt that "bad people" have affairs—and "good people" don't. Gradually we're coming to realize that affairs happen even to "good people in good marriages."

“ALTERNATIVE” MARRIAGES

What about "allowing" your spouse to have an affair?

Question #1:

What can you say about a "consented affair," i.e. when the wife agrees that her husband will have an affair? Are there statistics about the stability of such lifestyles? About the effect of the affair on the wife?

Question #2:

My wife is having an affair with an old lover who is also married. She has asked me to allow her to continue this affair but wants to stay married. Should I agree & under what terms & conditions?

Question #3:

What do you do when the wife is not interested in any form of physical contact, from hand holding, to kissing to making love, and a husband that has had and is having an affair and the wife is ok with it? There is a 3 year old child involved and the father believes that it is ok to continue having the affair, with someone he loves, but will not face what is going on in his marriage?

Question #4:

My husband has had affairs since we were together. The most recent affair occurred with my best friend. They are still together and she believes there is nothing "between" him and I and that we are only together for convenience. My husband says he loves me and doesn't understand his behavior. He says he believes he is doing something very natural and would be "unnatural" if he quit having affairs. I believe there is something wrong with him, as I do not feel the need for an affair. What is going on?

Peggy's Response:

While the focus of my work is on helping people deal with "secret" affairs, I also receive some questions like the above where the affair is out in the open—and supposedly OK with the spouse. In my experience, the only time an affair is even potentially OK with the spouse is when both people are involved in outside relationships. (At least when both people are involved, it's technically a sexually open marriage; otherwise, it's a case of one person getting what they want at the expense of their partner—because regardless of what a spouse may say (or tolerate), they are paying a price for their partner's outside relationship.

In general, I respect each couple's right to make their own decisions about the nature of their relationship (as to whether it's exclusive or "sexually open")—as long as they genuinely make a joint decision. But when it's a one-sided situation like those described above, then I do see big problems with it. While the one-sidedness of a "secret" affair is damaging, so is the one-sidedness or an affair where the spouse "knows."

Actually, the unfairness and inequality provide the very foundation of this kind of one-sided affair. In other words, the person having an affair is only thinking of their own end of the experience and ignoring or denying the impact on their spouse. They think they deserve to have both the spouse and the affair partner, but would not approve of the situation in reverse. And if they're honest, they

know that they also wouldn't want to have to deal with their spouse having an affair, even if they themselves were having one. They might say they wouldn't mind if their spouse also had an affair, but this reflects an idealistic view of an "open marriage."

Realistically, there are still major problems even if a couple decide that both people will be involved in outside relationships. Processing all the feelings that are generated by this situation requires an enormous amount of the time and energy—which has a dramatic impact on the quality of the marriage.

Even when both people are involved, problems eventually develop due to a sense of unfairness or inequality in the time/energy spent on the outside relationship—or one member of the couple winds up getting more "serious" about an outside relationship than is considered acceptable to the spouse. So the negative impact of dealing with all the issues generated by an outside relationship easily overwhelms the positive impact of the outside experience itself. And in the final analysis, most people determine that the trade-offs are just not worth it and wind up choosing monogamy.

Actually, choosing monogamy is an ongoing process—because this issue is never "settled once and for all" (however much we might wish that were possible). For instance, I've known couples involved in sexually open marriages, but I've known only a few who were able to sustain it over a long period of time. Unfortunately, neither long-term monogamy nor long-term sexually open marriages are either easy or prevalent. Most people "profess" monogamy, but deceptively have affairs in secrecy. So this is the issue we've dedicated ourselves to helping people deal with.

Just because the situations described in the above letters don't involve "secrecy," they still create enormous turmoil in the lives of the spouse—and ultimately the marriage. These situations are not likely to improve or even to stabilize as long as there exists such one-sided unfairness, inequality, and uncaring about the spouse's feelings. It's simply not smart for any spouse to "agree" to their partner's affair because there will inevitably be a time when the fallout is such that they feel they can no longer tolerate the situation. It's smarter not to ever start down a path that can not be sustained and is almost certainly going to get worse.

The bottom line is that the person who wants/expects their spouse to accept their affair is someone who wants to avoid the reality that all behavior has consequences. They are being extremely unrealistically if they think their spouse actually can accept this over the long haul. The very fact that the one having an affair gets what they want at the expense of their spouse means it creates an untenable situation. There's a limit to how long even the most tolerant person will hold up under this pressure.

What about "alternatives" to traditional marriage?

Periodically I receive questions where one partner wants to openly have sex outside the marriage. So this week I'm addressing some questions about polyamory, swinging, etc.

Question #1:

Have you ever heard of polyamory? My husband and I met a couple a few months ago that are into this. Our situation perpetuated into his lying to me and me lying to him. Our home life has been completely wrecked. I don't believe in polyamory although I believe that individuals can be attracted to others. The situation created problems for both of us, and we separated for a while. During the separation, he had an affair with her. We are back together and no longer have contact with the couple.

Question #2:

My husband revealed to me that he has been unfaithful 15 of our 18-year marriage, and is in love with another woman. He is actively in therapy exploring whether or not he is polyamorous and can even be monogamous, given his history. He claims to love me "deeply and profoundly" and wants to grow old with me, but is not ready to give up his affair. I have chosen to hang in there and explore with him. Society (and many books) tells me I'm nuts. Can you recommend any supportive literature for me?

Question #3:

My wife of 20 years insists on the right to explore outside the marriage, saying she married too young (21). We have an almost 8-year-old daughter, and for the child I wish to stay together. She is on at least man #2 that I know of. I have been stay-at-home parent for 8 years. Self-esteem sometimes low...

Question #4:

What to do when your husband wants to get involved in swinging, and you don't?

Question #5:

My wife enjoys one-night stands and freedom from her marriage, but claims to want marriage and loves me. I accept her because I love her dearly...I give her permission, otherwise she gets miserable toward me. Our best sex ever is when she fantasizes or when she is meeting other men. What do I do?

Question #6: (questioning the whole idea of marriage)

As time goes by I find that I accept the fact of the affair-possibly too much. If this happens in up to 80% of marriages, why do we marry? Why do we teach our children to marry? How could we ever trust our men not to cheat and our "sisters" not to cheat with them?

Peggy's Response:

I'll begin with the last question (#6)... "Why marry" if affairs are so prevalent? And I'll refer to the prior question (#5) to illustrate the most likely reason: that many people want BOTH, the satisfactions that come from a spouse and family AND the excitement that comes from having an affair.

Another reason is that people don't intend to have an affair when they marry. Most people enter marriage with the intention to be monogamous, but unfortunately, this doesn't prevent affairs. For more on this, see these Articles about Affairs posted on my website: "Preventing Affairs" and "Who has affairs - and Why" (specifically the section: 'How can affairs be prevented?')

As for the basic question behind all the above questions: "what to do about it" when your spouse wants to have sex outside the marriage and you don't... obviously there is no one answer that fits for everyone. The fact is that everything in life involves tradeoffs. You can have almost anything you want, but not everything you want. So each person needs to determine for themselves what tradeoffs they are willing to make.

So if you're clear that maintaining the marriage (despite it not being monogamous) is your higher priority, you may decide to stay. But if you're clear that a monogamous marriage is your higher priority, you may decide to leave—which may lead the spouse to re-think their position. (If your decision is to leave, then the spouse who wants both the marriage and the outside sex has to decide which is their higher priority.)

Other considerations are those mentioned in a couple of the questions: the idea of polyamory. The polyamory movement is reminiscent of the "free love," swinging and open marriages of the 1960s and 1970s. In fact, I did some work with a "non-monogamy" organization many years ago.

Below is an excerpt from my book titled "Dear Peggy:"

There's often an idealistic view of an "open marriage," thinking somehow you can "have the best of both worlds"—a solid, satisfying marriage and the excitement of affairs. But realistically, that's not likely to happen. Because talking through the issues involved in a sexually open marriage (and processing all the feelings involved) requires an enormous amount of time and energy—which has a dramatic impact on the quality of the primary relationship. In the final analysis, most people determine that the tradeoffs are just not worth it.

I've known couples involved in sexually open marriages, but I've known only a few who were able to sustain them over a long period of time. Neither long-term monogamy nor long-term sexually open marriages are either easy or prevalent. Most people profess monogamy, but deceptively have affairs in secret.

(end of excerpt from "Dear Peggy")

Unless there is a willingness to lie about an affair, most people will choose to be monogamous—because most people simply can't handle a sexually open marriage. While "in the abstract," a person sometimes thinks they want a sexually open marriage, it's usually only when they're thinking of their own end of the experience. They aren't focusing on both parties having other relationships.

For anyone interested in understanding more about this issue, I recommend the classic book by Nena and George O'Neill titled *Open Marriage*. By the way, most people completely missed the O'Neill's point in their book. They were only saying that a "sexually open marriage" *might* be possible for some couples who had already evolved an open relationship in all other ways. The public took their term "open marriage" and interpreted it as "sexually open marriage" when the sexual aspect was a very small part of the overall kind of open marriage they were suggesting might be possible for a few enlightened couples.

Re: Polyamory

Here's the definition promoted among those committed to the idea:

Polyamory (many loves) is a relatively new word created for relationships where an adult intimately loves more than one other adult. This includes open couples, group marriage, intimate networks, triads and even people who currently have one or no partners, yet are open to possibility of more. It is another word for ethical nonmonogamy. People who describe themselves as polyamorous (or poly) also usually embrace the value of honesty in relationships. They do not want

to have affairs or cheat on a loved one and are dedicated to going beyond jealousy and possession in relationships. It is usual for them to make safer sex agreements and be committed to full communication. And here's an interesting quote about this lifestyle: "Polyamory is not an alternative to monogamy. It's an alternative to cheating."

So while I am aware of various alternatives to traditional marriage, my focus is clearly on providing more information, understanding and perspective about secret affairs aimed at helping people recover from this devastating experience.

Why does he want a threesome?

Question:

My husband has a desire of having a sex with 2 women (a threesome). We have been married only one year. I feel very disappointed that he dreams about that kind of stuff; I feel like I was disrespected. He is 24 years old. Is that natural for younger man? or not? I am kind of paranoid.

Peggy's Response:

The quick immediate answer as to whether the interest in having sex with 2 women is "natural" is "yes, it's entirely natural"—in that it's an extremely common "fantasy" that most men have at one time or another. The thing that may be somewhat different is the husband's verbalizing this desire to his wife.

However, in fact, it can be much "safer" and potentially less damaging for this desire to be spoken out loud instead of harbored secretly. Sometimes secret fantasies take on a power by virtue of their secrecy that makes people more inclined to act on them (without informing their spouse). The key to the meaning behind it being spoken out loud is whether it's expressed as a "dream" (as mentioned above)—or whether there's a specific request that the wife participate in such a threesome.

When couples feel comfortable enough to share their fantasies (including the common male fantasy of a threesome), there's a better chance that they can channel the excitement of the fantasy into something positive within their own private relationship. But if a partner's fantasies get "out of hand" (in terms of pressure to actually act on them), this presents a different challenge and a more serious issue to be dealt with.

So just "dreaming about this stuff" (or openly talking about dreaming about this stuff) is not at all unusual or indicative of a problem—either with the individual or with the marriage. It's just part of the open sharing that needs to take place within a relationship so that each partner really knows the full range of thoughts/dreams of the other. In other words, it's not the desire for a threesome that is significant (since it is, in fact, quite common); it's whether or not there's pressure to actually take some action that pursues this fantasy. In any event, it is absolutely not a reflection on the desirability of the spouse. It's a totally separate desire that is not an indication of any dissatisfaction with the sexual relationship within the marriage. It's more a fantasy of something "additional"—not a reflection on what "is."

Open Marriage?

Question:

My husband secretly had a series of affairs. Now he's told me about them and has proposed an "open marriage." I'm not at all interested in an open marriage; but I love him very much. I just don't know what to do.

Peggy's Response:

While "in the abstract," a person (usually the husband) sometimes thinks they want a sexually open marriage, it's usually only when they're thinking of their own end of the experience. They aren't focusing on both parties having other relationships. But when there's total fairness, equality, and honesty in a relationship, most people will "choose" monogamy—because most people can't handle a sexually open marriage. Also, since the issue of monogamy is never "settled once and for all" (however much we might wish that were possible), choosing monogamy is an ongoing process.

There's often an idealistic view of an "open marriage," thinking somehow you can "have the best of both worlds"—a solid, satisfying marriage *and* the excitement of affairs. But realistically, that's not likely to happen. Because talking through the issues involved in a sexually open marriage (and processing all the feelings involved) requires an enormous amount of the time and energy—which has a dramatic impact on the quality of the primary relationship. In the final analysis, most people determine that the trade-offs are just not worth it.

Nena O'Neill, who with her husband George wrote the classic book, "Open Marriage" is still a close personal friend—and I have learned much about this issue from her through the years. I recommend their book for anyone interested in understanding more about this issue. (By the way, most people completely missed the O'Neill's point in their book. They were only saying that sexually open marriage might be possible for some couples who had already evolved an open relationship in all other ways. The public took their term "open marriage" and interpreted it as "sexually open marriage" when the sexual aspect was a very small part of the overall kind of open marriage they were suggesting might be possible for a few enlightened couples.)

I've known couples involved in sexually open marriages, but I've known only a few who were able to sustain it over a long period of time. Unfortunately, neither long-term monogamy nor long-term sexually open marriages are either easy or prevalent. Most people "profess" monogamy, but deceptively have affairs in secrecy. So this is the issue we've dedicated ourselves to helping people deal with.

THE SINGLE THIRD PARTY

What about help for the third party?

Question #1:

Your topics address only the spouses; what about the third party? Who helps them deal with their pain?

Question #2:

Everything I read about offers help, guidance, and support for the victims of affairs/infidelity. Is there someplace I can get information for those things... being the "adulteress?" I am seeking professional help, but would really like to be able to read more from different perspectives. Can you recommend any resources (books, articles, websites, etc.) for me to look into?

Question #3:

Why is there no compassion/understanding/support for a cheating spouse?

Question #4:

Do you have any resources for the person who is the third party in the affair? Most stuff seems to focus on the couple and the lover can end up with nothing if the affair ends.

Peggy's Response:

As I have repeatedly said, when it comes to affairs, everyone gets hurt. And there is often even less sympathy for the third party than for the married person with whom they had an affair. Many people have the attitude that "they asked for it" or "they should have known better," etc., thus dismissing the fact that they nevertheless have to deal with the pain when it ends—as it almost always does (more about that later).

And, as pointed out in the above questions... not only is the third party left to deal with their pain without much support, but they're also usually dealing with it alone—without any helpful resources to guide them or help them recover.

I have addressed the issues faced by the third party in previous Responses, one of which is posted as a permanent part of the Articles about Affairs. See the article titled: Is there help for the third party? (At the bottom of that article you will find links to lists of other previous collections of questions that addressed this issue as well as to my book, *Dear Peggy*, that contains a couple of sections on the subject.)

Frankly, helpful resources are few and far between. There are some message boards available for third parties, but they're seldom the kind of responsible outlet that is needed. In fact, I'm not aware of anything that addresses the issues faced by men who are third parties. And the only really solid resource I can recommend for women who are third parties is a book by Rona Subotnik titled *Will He Really Leave Her for Me?* (I wrote a Review of this book, which is posted on the website under the "Marriage/Divorce" category of the "Reviews" section.)

This book does a good job of gently guiding a woman through all the specific questions related to the whole situation in order to make her own decisions at every step along the way. It is aimed

primarily at the plight of single women who are third parties, but some relevance for married women as well. It is excellent in systematically addressing all the issues that arise in the course of an affair, particularly the key question: will the affair will lead to the man leaving his wife to make this new relationship permanent. (Statistically, the chances of a successful long-term relationship developing when it begins from an affair is about like winning the lottery: remotely possible, but very, very, very unlikely.)

I think it might help for a third party (even in the midst of the pain of an ended affair) to step back and get a broader perspective about the nature of affairs as compared to marriage. Basically, an affair has more to do with the newness of the affair partner as compared with the familiarity of the spouse. For more understanding of the different dynamics involved, see the article posted on the website (under the "Articles about Marriage and Family" section) titled: The Changing Nature of Love.

But this "newness" eventually wears off, exposing the fact that the whole situation has more to do with the particular roles people are playing than with who is playing the roles. (It helped me personally to realize that the roles made such a big difference. For instance, if my husband had been married to someone else, he might have wanted to have an affair with me!)

So the bottom line is to recognize that "losing" the person with whom you were having an affair may not be as big a loss as you think. The truth is that sometimes even if you "win," you "lose."

Here's an excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth* that explains what I mean:

Even when a person does choose the third party over their spouse, they frequently learn much later (if the other person takes on the role of spouse) that their specialness had more to do with their earlier role than with the person themselves. Many people have an illusion that this new person offers a new life, only to discover after a few years that all the old feelings and issues are there just as in the past. They didn't really change games at all, they only changed the players. Today's third party may be tomorrow's spouse who is unhappy in their marriage.

(end of excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*)

Where is help for the third party?

Question #1

I had an affair with a married man. I knew better but chose to get involved. It is now over, his/his wife's choice. Where can I get help in dealing with the emotional devastation that I feel? You address marriages, but what about those of us dealing with guilt, abandonment and scars? Where do I turn to get help in dealing with this?

Question #2

I am the guilty spouse, and I am feeling terrible at what I have done and how I have devastated my husband. There seems to be a lot of resources for helping wronged spouses, but I can't find anything to help me deal with what is all my own fault. Please could you offer some advice?

Peggy's Response:

These letters illustrate the fact that affairs bring pain to everyone involved. Much of the healing from this kind of experience simply requires time. It takes time to assimilate such painful experiences and find ways to grow stronger by virtue of dealing with them. So while there may be regret over what happened, there can be pride in handling the fallout in a responsible way. And since we often learn more from our mistakes than our successes, we can use whatever crises we face as an opportunity to learn something that allows us to be better people in the future.

The first letter shows what happens when people let their emotions overwhelm their rational thinking. Since the common pattern is for the third party to eventually be left to pick up the pieces and get on with their own lives, it's probably better to start that process sooner rather than later. But when they do finally face the consequences of their choices, it may serve to encourage them to think more clearly in the future and take control of their lives instead of being blinded by too much denial and wishful thinking.

It might also help in the recovery process to realize that all that was lost was an illusion—since even if a married man actually gets a divorce, only about 10% wind up marrying the other woman. And since about 60% of second marriages end in divorce, there was never much of a chance of any outcome other than the one described in the first letter.

I'm a big believer in the power of information (and books as a source of information), but there aren't many good books for the third party. And the only ones I can recommend are specifically addressed to the "other woman." One of the best resources is a very old book (now out of print, but perhaps available in libraries) by Melissa Sands titled "The Mistress' Survival Manual." Another book that addresses this issue is Laurel Richardson's book, "The New Other Woman." It could also be helpful to expand the focus to thinking about life in a larger framework (not limited just to relationship issues) by doing some life-planning as presented in a number of good life-planning books, including our own Life-Design Workbook. There is likely to be a significant learning related to "looking down the road" toward where any particular situation is leading rather than getting caught up in the moment and failing to think clearly and act responsibly.

It's sometimes hard to step back, take a deep breath, and change course. But simply writing letters like the above indicates a willingness to learn from this experience—which is a positive first step toward taking back your life. And any crisis in life, however difficult, is also an opportunity to grow and learn for the future. Few people who develop in a significant way are able to do it without having faced (and overcome) some great life difficulty.

Is there any help for the third party?

Question:

I know I am probably going to make quite a few people angry with this question, but I will ask it anyway. I am "the other woman" desperately trying to get out of this relationship and do what I consider is the right thing. Is there any help out there for people who are the third party?

Peggy's Response:

This letter accurately reflects the fact that most "help" for dealing with affairs is (understandably) directed toward the spouse of the married person involved in an affair and/or the couple. While I believe much of the information, understanding and perspective that I provide about the issue of affairs can be useful to everyone, it's true that very little is aimed specifically at addressing the issues of being a third party. Periodically, I focus specifically on issues facing the third party, and am doing so again at this time.

This time I'll focus specifically on the above situation where the other woman is "desperately trying to get out of this relationship." As hard as it may be to extricate yourself (both physically and emotionally), the most effective way to accomplish this is to do it quickly and completely—with no dragging it out, which just prolongs the inevitable. (Realistically, affairs last from 6 months to 2 years, seldom leading to divorce, and seldom leading to a new marriage even if there is a divorce.) So the sooner there is complete separation, the sooner you can get on with your life.

Quick and complete separation 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! That's not to say it won't be painful, but the pain is over more quickly than prolonging things with a slow withdrawal. (As an example, think of the difference in quickly removing a band-aid as compared to very slowly pulling it off, one hair at a time.)

Often I hear 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 married man pleading for continued contact of some kind. He may be ambivalent or extend some kind of false hope for something more, but it's usually just that he wants to experience the positive parts of the affair and still hold onto the positive aspects of marriage and family. It's unlikely he can actually say that out loud (or that he can even get that degree of clarity himself). He just knows that he doesn't want to face the difficulties and/or consequences of either final decision. However, a man who actually cares for you would not ask you to continue to remain in limbo, sacrificing your own well-being for his benefit.

As for how to have the strength to make a complete separation, it will be important to have someone to turn to for support and accountability in this effort (similar to the way there is someone to turn to in AA for contact and support in a moment of weakness). It's also helpful to specifically plan other activities (for your mind and your body) so you stay otherwise engaged. Finally, it's useful whenever you think of him (which you will do) to avoid letting yourself dwell on the thoughts or escalate the thoughts. (Like with meditation, just notice you're having the thoughts and then let them go; do not focus on them, obsess about them, etc.)

How can the third party "move on?"

(Here are two letters from third parties, one single and one married.)

Question #1:

I have been involved in an affair for a year and a half now. I have not been able to move on from this person, or date others with interest since (no matter how hard I try) I'm still attracted to this person. I know how cliché this sounds, but I feel as though this person is for me. I don't know how to move on, and am having trouble shutting this person out as they keep on coming back to me. I need to know how to shut this person out for good, and move on with my life with no regrets.

Question #2:

I am a married women that was having an affair with a married man at my job. Now that the affair has ended I am having trouble coping with the fact that I see this person everyday. Should I change jobs? I have been at this job for almost 10 years and I love my job. Please Help!!!

Peggy's Response:

As these letters demonstrate, affairs usually end with the third party trying to pick up the pieces and move on. Affairs rarely lead to a full-time relationship, even if the marriage ends; so most third parties will face this situation at some point. (As I've said before, it's better to begin this process of moving on sooner rather than later.) But whenever that time comes, it's best to move on as quickly and completely as possible.

The first letter describes a common plight of the third party—waiting in limbo while the married affair partner leaves but then "keeps on coming back to me." It's an extremely self-centered attitude for the married person to expect the third party to be a backdrop to their lives, to "stand by"—in case they're wanted or needed. Being in this stand-by position is demeaning, and one way to stand up for yourself is to cut all ties by insisting that there be NO contact in the future.

While this "going cold turkey" with no further contact may seem too drastic and/or painful, it's actually less painful than dragging it out. It's somewhat similar to the differences in how you might remove a Band-Aid. For instance, jerking the Band-Aid off quickly may hurt a lot, but the pain lasts much longer if you try to peel it back gently. The longer it takes to achieve a final and complete separation, the longer you live with the stress, anxiety and uncertainty of never knowing when the other person will show up again.

As to *how* to make this complete separation, it may involve taking actions to become unreachable by the other person. This could involve moving, changing jobs, changing phone numbers and email addresses, etc. But even if contact is still attempted, it's important that it not be successful. This means making one clear (preferably written) statement that you will not respond to any further attempts at contact. Then it means following up by hanging up if called, returning mail unopened, deleted email unread, etc. It might also mean involving others who know of the situation that they are not to "aid and abet" contact in any way.

I realize that this all seems even more difficult if you think of this other person as being "the one." But the whole idea of finding that one person who is your soul-mate is quite unrealistic. For a better understanding of the fact that you don't "find" a soulmate, you can only possibly "develop" into soulmates...see the article under the "Marriage and Family" section of the website titled "The Full Monty."

As for the second letter above, specifically asking about whether to change jobs...

It's obvious from what I've already written here that changing jobs in this situation would be absolutely essential. Have trouble coping with this situation is pretty much inevitable. Seeing the

affair partner every day is the worst possible situation, and is sure to drag out the process of being able to get on with life. The unfortunate truth is that there are consequences involved in affairs, and in this kind of situation, one of the consequences may be having to give up a job you love. But losing a job is less traumatic than losing control over your life.

For more on this, see the article under the "Articles about Affairs" section of the website titled "Sex in the Office."

Help for those who had affairs?

Question #1:

I have seen plenty of resources for spouses who have been cheated on, but I can't find any resources for the cheating spouse. While the affair is behind us, I still have very dismal days thinking about the thrill that was. I love my wife, but I remain very confused. Please Help.

Question #2:

I have found many articles and material written about affairs, their effect, the devastation and recovery. This has helped me in my understanding of the situation. The problem I have is that I have found nothing concerning the recovery for the other woman (or man) that was involved with a married man. Her recovery is just as difficult, but I have found nothing in the ways of support to help her/him through this excruciating time. Do you know where to find non-judgmental support?

Peggy's Response:

I periodically receive questions like these asking why there is no help for the person who has had an affair. The above questions about recovery come from a married man who had an affair and from a (presumably) single woman who is trying to recover from an affair with a married man. (The above letters describe two different sets of relationships, not related to each other.)

Since I recognize that when it comes to affairs, "everyone winds up getting hurt," I'll review some of the perspective that can be helpful to those who have been involved in an affair.

In the first letter, the man says: "While the affair is behind us, I still have very dismal days thinking about the thrill that was."

It's helpful to clearly recognize that the affair situation is a fantasy that exists in a bubble. In fact, there's a certain "idealization" of the fantasy relationship (with something of a Romeo and Juliet quality) that makes the idea of giving up the affair feel all the more emotionally difficult. It's easy to get far more attached to this fantasy situation than anyone expects or wants to admit, becoming a pleasant habit that's hard to drop.

But dealing with the "loss" may be easier when clearly focusing on the fact that it wasn't nearly as "real" as it appeared—so the sense of loss is mostly of a fantasy, not of a real thing. In fact, it was doomed from the beginning in that it was almost guaranteed to end. (Unless an affair is discovered earlier, most affairs last from 6 months to 2 years, which is how long it usually takes for a bit of reality to set in.)

One reason to avoid focusing on the feelings of loss at ending the affair is to recognize that doing so serves to pollute whatever positive memories you might otherwise have about the experience. So it's in your own best interest to move forward with a clearer recognition that this was part of your past and doesn't have to color your future. You can re-enter the "real world" and simply hold the memories of the affairs as what they were, a fantasy that was bound to end.

Another way to address the confusion about your feelings for your wife is to actively focus on those feelings while deliberately avoiding dwelling on the past feelings for the other woman. In fact, this is a time when you can actually strengthen your feelings for your wife. But first, it's important to avoid making comparisons between your feelings for your wife and those for the other woman, remembering that the feelings for your wife are the real feelings of love while the feelings for the other woman were representative of what's typical in the "first stage" of a relationship. Those feelings simply don't last in any long-term relationship. For more on the "Changing Nature of Love," read the first chapter of *Making Love Stay* which is posted on the website under book descriptions in the Bookstore.

The second letter is from a single woman trying to find non-judgmental support for her own efforts to recover from the impact of the affair. Unfortunately, many people who become the third party *think* they're aware of the risks. But they're almost never prepared for the inevitable pain that comes when the affair ends—as it almost always does. *Very* rarely does an affair lead to divorce and marrying the affair-partner, so the single third party is almost always left "holding the bag" in the end.

When the end does come, it's smart to try to extricate yourself (both physically and emotionally), in the most effective way possible, which means doing it completely—with no dragging it out, which just prolongs the pain. So the sooner there is complete separation, the sooner you can get on with your life.

Quick and complete separation 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! That's not to say it won't be painful, but the pain is over more quickly than prolonging things with a slow withdrawal. (As an example, think of the difference in quickly removing a band-aid as compared to very slowly pulling it off, one hair at a time.)

As for how to have the strength to make a complete separation, it will be important to have someone to turn to for support and accountability in this effort (similar to the way there is someone to turn to in AA for contact and support in a moment of weakness). It's also helpful to specifically plan other activities (for your mind and your body) so you stay otherwise engaged. Finally, it's useful whenever you think of him (which you will do) to avoid letting yourself dwell on the thoughts or escalate the thoughts. (Like with meditation, just notice you're having the thoughts and then let them go; do not focus on them, obsess about them, etc.)

The "non-judgmental support" requested in the second letter above is what I'm trying to provide in that I'm not focusing on the right or wrong way of thinking, only on the "smart" way of thinking and behaving. For instance, it's smart to recognize that you deserve more than playing "stand-by" to someone else's life.

And instead of focusing on what you've lost, it's smart to deliberately focus on what you can gain in terms of pursuing other strengths/interests in life. Everyone faces some kind of crisis in their lives, and these crises are opportunities to grow stronger and smarter in living your life in a more conscious way.

What are the chances of marrying the lover?

Question #1:

What percentage of men leave their wives to marry their lovers and what is the subsequent divorce rate among men and the lover?

Question #2:

Can you have a lasting relationship with the person you had the affair with?

Peggy's Response:

While many third parties think the married person plans to get a divorce and develop a long-term relationship with them, this seldom happens. In fact, there can be quite a long "limbo" period where the married person says they plan to leave, but seldom actually does it.

In most instances, an affair does *not* lead to divorce; and even when there is a divorce, it does not lead to marrying the third party. In fact, only about 10% of those who divorce actually wind up marrying the person with whom they had an affair. And since about 60% of second marriages end in divorce (and 70% of second marriages that begin as an affair end in divorce), the chance of developing a long-term relationship that began as an affair is extremely small.

It's not too difficult to understand why few of these marriages succeed. On a practical basis, as with all marriages, there are standard marital issues to deal with (related to dealing with children and financial stresses of "two families")—plus there are all the additional problems due to fallout from the affair.

Also, when people are in affairs, they present a side of themselves that's not representative of the whole person. It's a special version of their best aspects, free from the normal responsibilities involved in sharing a total life situation. The very nature of playing the role of third party instead of spouse means it's a fantasy relationship. Since the roles and structure of family life create many restrictions and responsibilities, a person's affair is not so much a rejection of the mate as a rejection of these role restrictions.

So after some time passes in the new "real-life" relationship, they discover that the specialness of the third party had far more to do with the role they were playing than with the particular person playing it. Many people have an illusion that this new person is their soulmate, only to discover after a few years that all the old feelings and issues are there just as in the past. They didn't really change games at all, they only changed the players. So today's third party may be tomorrow's spouse who is unhappy in their marriage.

As with any statistics, there's always someone who might "beat the odds" and manage to establish a long-term relationship that began from an affair, but the chances are about like winning the lottery—not something any sensible person would count on.

Why do you say it's a fantasy?

(This is a follow-up question regarding a previous question in which I responded that an affair was really a fantasy situation.)

Question:

The problem I have is, I can't seem to believe what I had with the other man was just "fantasy." We both believed in it until he saw this other woman. He told her all about it; he then changed. But we both felt it was real: met out families and friends, did everything together, starting to move in and then boom...he needs time. I agree, thinking it's a phase, then found out 2 months after that he was seeing this other person and had moved in already! Why is it not real? Thanks.

Peggy's Response:

There's a very old song ("My Foolish Heart") with a lyric that fits this situation:

There's a line between love and fascination
That's hard to see on an evening such as this
For they both give the very same sensation
When you're lost is the magic of a kiss.

Frankly, no one should reasonably believe they are experiencing "the real thing" until after about a two-year period during which the infatuation (fantasy?) is being driven by the excitement of the newness of the connection. This time period is not arbitrary; it conforms to the scientifically-based information about romantic love that has been growing in recent years. For the most comprehensive understanding of this concept, I highly recommend the most recent book by Helen Fisher, *Why we Love: The Nature and Chemistry of Romantic Love*.

Simplistically put, there are different brain chemicals that determine the different stages of "love." The chemicals that determine romantic passion are different from those that gradually transform passion into feelings of deep attachment. The chemicals of romantic love are stimulated by the excitement of the newness and novelty. But this does not last beyond about 2 years. Then it ends—and has the possibility of being transformed into the kind of love that creates a more lasting bond.

This "romantic love" stage applies to situations where people are dating and may eventually marry as well as to people who are married and may get swept up in an extramarital affair. Efforts to recapture the initial feelings of romantic love fail to appreciate that this stage never lasts. For more on this, please read the first chapter (especially the section on "The Changing Nature of Love") from our book *Making Love Stay*. (The first chapter is posted following the Table of Contents in the description of the book posted on the website.)

Once there is an understanding of the Changing Nature of Love, people like the writer of this question can better see the unreasonableness of thinking that after 4 months of dating and 2 months of considering moving in that this represents "the real thing" rather than a "fantasy." As explained above, it takes about 2 years to get beyond the chemical "high" of romantic love to know whether or not there is a real love relationship that can last.

This message is also important for single people who are dating and consider marrying too soon—too soon being less than 2 years after first beginning to date. It takes *at least* that long to get to the point where the romantic haze begins to give way to the real nature of the relationship. And if there are barriers to the amount of time able to be spent together (thereby extending the period of "newness"), it can take even longer to get out from under the control of the initial "chemistry of romantic love" and the "fantasy" that it represents.

Where can we find help for the person who had an affair?

Question:

Your books are helping me a lot. But my wife has had a hard time finding anything to help the person that had the affair. Even though it actually happened 5 years ago, she is finding that since she has kept it hidden for so long, she is finally having to deal with those feelings.

Peggy's Response:

I've addressed this general question in the past; however, it's especially touching to see that this time it's the spouse of the person who had an affair who (recognizing the pain/guilt) wants to find some way to help.

As for the fact that in this instance it "happened 5 years ago"... recovery only begins when you openly face it and begin actively dealing with it. ("Keeping it hidden" is like "burying it alive," and it's just as strong when you bring it out to face it as it was in the beginning.)

As this letter clearly illustrates, often the hurt spouse is not the only one who has a difficult time "forgiving." When a person who has had an affair fully faces up to the reality of what they've done, they may find it extremely difficult to forgive themselves.

They are likely to be gripped by many of the same feelings of loss and regret as their spouse—like thinking "if only..." this hadn't happened. They might say they'd give anything if they could go back and avoid inflicting this kind of pain.

But learning to live with the sense of regret (and guilt) is part of the challenge of dealing with any life crisis. It involves accepting the reality of the fact that life is now different and nothing will change the past. But going beyond that to focus on what they can do now and in the future that may make a difference.

It's important to accept the fact that our actions can not be erased or undone, but that we can dig deep inside and discover some way to become a better person by virtue of this experience. This focus and process can be of great help in counteracting the feelings of guilt or regret.

So the first step is letting go of "if only..." and looking toward "what can I do to demonstrate that I've learned an important lesson" from this experience. And, further, how can I take this learning and use it to become a better person. No matter how difficult something is to deal with, there's always the potential for learning from it. And using these learnings to forge a more responsible and more fulfilling life can be of great help in counteracting the feelings of guilt or regret.

Frankly, a great deal of the "strength of character" that people exhibit comes from the process of surviving some crisis that has severely tested them as a person. To paraphrase a famous saying by the philosopher Nietzsche: "That which doesn't kill me makes me stronger." Every crisis we face in life is also an opportunity to grow stronger, and responsibly dealing with the fall-out from this experience can actually strengthen you as a person.

It's not what mistakes we make in life that define us; it's how we deal with those mistakes and use them to learn and grow and improve. The "best" people are usually those who have been tested and failed, but then rose to prove themselves anew.

For more of my comments on this issue, see the Article permanently posted on my website titled: "Is there help for the third party?"

Finally, as the writer of this question mentioned, it's difficult to find material written specifically to help the person who had an affair. So I'd like to pass along information about locating one book that concentrates exclusively on the role of the unfaithful partner during the early stages of affair

discovery. It was written by a former betrayed spouse—to help the offending marriage partner in their efforts to save and heal their marriage.

The author says that not only was this book written specifically for the partner who had an affair, but she asks that it *not* be read by the hurt spouse—in order to give the your partner the chance to undo the damage on their own. She also notes that she has included Biblical scripture throughout the book, but that it was written for everyone of any religion or no religion.

The title of the book is *Infidelity Crisis: How to Gain Forgiveness and Respect After Your Affair*. The author is Katie Coston.

(It's only available as a pdf file to be downloaded for \$10 from the author's website.)

To read the author's description of this 152-page book and scroll down to find the link to use for purchasing and downloading a copy, go to the author's website at: AfterTheAffair.net

SPOUSE DEALING WITH THE THIRD PARTY

How do I deal with my feelings about the other woman?

Question:

(I still get a lot of letters about dealing with the other woman. So I'm printing 3 of the most recent ones before responding.)

Question #1:

It's been 4 years since the affair my husband had, and every day of my life I wonder what does this girl look like. I feel she must have been very beautiful for my husband to think he was in love with her and I truly believe that at the time this is how he felt. He tells me over and over she doesn't mean a thing to him but I found a letter he wrote to her when he thought she was leaving him and from what I read he seemed to be in love with her.

Question #2:

Why does one become obsessed with the other woman, e.g., what she looks like, her voice, her body, her personality and how she managed to seduce, engage or attract your husband?

Question #3:

When is it appropriate to confront the other woman? I find that it is very difficult to recover without confronting and putting the other person in her place. What do you think?

Peggy's Response:

Wondering (and worrying) about the other woman is a common problem. There's often the feeling that there must have been something really special about them. But in most instances there is nothing particularly special about the third party; they're simply different—and the primary difference is simply that they have the role of lover instead of the role of husband or wife.

One factor in the role played by the third party is that they are freer to enjoy certain aspects of the relationship that are more difficult when a couple share joint responsibilities and a joint financial base. When people are in affairs, they present a side of themselves that's not representative of the whole person. It's a special version of their best aspects, free from the normal responsibilities involved in sharing a total life situation; whereas the roles and structure of family life create many restrictions and responsibilities.

A person's affair is not so much a rejection of the mate as a rejection of these role restrictions. This awareness can be especially helpful in dealing with our feelings of comparison with the third party. The affair involves a short-term fantasy whereas marriage involves a more long-term reality about relationships. For more understanding about the difference between the kind of new love (or more accurately, infatuation) involved in an affair and the much deeper love bond involved in a long-term marriage, read the first chapter (posted on my website) of *Making Love Stay*.

As for confronting the other woman, here's an excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth* about this issue:

When a wife decides to seek out the other woman, she's obviously taking a chance on being hurt even more if the meeting goes badly. The other woman may not feel the least bit

embarrassed or guilty about the affair, which only serves to increase the feelings of anger and frustration.

On the other hand, it's possible that the meeting can provide a sense of the real person behind the image of "other woman" and diffuse the intensity of the feelings. Confronting her adversary in person can give her a sense of strength that offsets her feelings of being weak and helpless.

Since there's no way to predetermine the outcome of meeting the other woman, each person must decide for herself what she thinks is best. While it might be a mistake for some, for others it might work out very well.

(end of excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*)

Should I confront the other woman?

Question:

Should I confront the "other woman"? I have had no contact with her at all and I feel like I need to tell her what I think of her, kind of like the victim in a court room confronting the suspect.

Peggy's Response:

There's an understandable desire to confront the third party, thinking it will *either* "get through" to them in a way that they can see/understand the consequences of their actions *or* that saying something to the third party will at least alleviate some of the intense feelings (obsessions) about them.

However, there's a huge difference in speaking out in a court room (as mentioned above) and speaking to a third party in the "real world." First of all, a court room is a controlled environment. When someone speaks in court, the party about whom they're speaking doesn't respond or engage in a give-and-take. But in confronting a third party, any idealistic scenario as to what will be said is likely to be far from the reality—since there's very little potential for a positive payoff. Not only is the third party unlikely to "accept" (agree with) whatever is said, but a confrontation is likely to leave a person feeling even worse if/when the third party fails to react in the desired way.

The common wisdom (with which I agree) is that the best course of action is to make absolutely *no* contact with the third party. Continuing to focus on the third party simply distracts from the important effort of either working toward rebuilding the marriage *or* moving on separately, whichever is the case.

Especially if staying in the marriage, it's likely to be much more effective to use all the available energy in focusing on the spouse, not on the third party. In fact, it's possible for a couple to become even closer due to their joint effort to avoid any further contact with the third party.

How can I compete?

Question:

My husband had an affair two years ago. During that time he told me that he was attracted to this other woman because of her personality. She was outgoing and fun to be with. He also told me that I didn't know how to have fun and I was always too serious. Just recently he brought that up to me again, stating that maybe if I wasn't this way he would of never had an affair. He also stated that this is what bothers him about me. What should I do?

Peggy's Response:

If ever there were a weak case of trying to blame the spouse for an affair—this is it: that the spouse was lacking in that she "didn't know how to have fun..." Assigning blame for an affair on any kind of lack in the spouse or in the relationships is a simplistic notion that I have written about extensively.

This may be one of the most ludicrous points of comparison that I have ever heard: that the other woman was "outgoing and fun to be with" while the wife "didn't know how to have fun." It's fairly obvious that the primary difference in this kind of "fun" attitude is inherent in the role a person is playing—far more than in the person who is playing it. There's no comparison between the fantasy life of an affair where people are free to focus only on each other and on having "fun"—and the real life of marriage where people have joint responsibilities and commitments that easily interfere with being fun-loving.

Regarding the final question: "What should I do?"—I certainly can't prescribe what to do, but I can suggest what NOT to do. It would be misguided to try to "pretend" to be "outgoing and fun"—all the while feeling pressure to be that way. Most people are more outgoing and enjoy themselves more when they focus more on themselves and what they enjoy instead of trying to figure out how someone else wants them to be—and then try to fit that mold.

If someone wants their spouse to be less serious, creating a situation where they have to deal with the pain of an affair is NOT the way to decrease their seriousness; in fact, it's sure to increase it because of the stress and strain associated with the deception and feelings of rejection. (This reminds me of a true story of a mother who used to spank her child—and would tell the child that she would only stop the spanking after the child first stopped crying.)

The situation described in the above letter is similarly uncaring and unreasonable. Perhaps if there's more reason to find joy than pain in such a relationship, someone might not be such a serious person. All too often a person who focuses a great deal on "fun" is someone who doesn't care much for responsibility, inconvenience, or accommodation—leaving the other person to "pick up the slack" and be the one who does handle those things (thus being more "serious.")

In fact, two people often polarize each other in that the less responsible one partner is, the more responsible the other is likely to be. The less serious one partner is, the more serious the other is likely to be. Each one then counteracts the qualities in the other, getting even more extreme in their own way of being. So finding a more balanced way of each person taking on more of the other's characteristics may lead to a more satisfying situation for both.

Can they remain friends?

Question:

Have you ever seen any success stories where the person who had an affair remained friends with the third party and it worked out?

Peggy's Response:

First, let me say that I have heard *no* success story where *only* the person who had an affair remained friends with the third party—but I *have* heard some stories where *both* the person who had an affair *and* the spouse have remained "friendly" with the third party.

To be specific, I'll recount the few types of success stories I have heard.

In some instances where the third party was a relative (and therefore unavoidably involved in the lives of the couple's family), the couple have been able to reestablish a "friendly" relationship with the third party—for the sake of family harmony.

In some instances where a child was born from the affair, the couple have been able to establish a "friendly" relationship with the third party—for the sake of the child.

In some instances where the wife and the other woman were very close friends prior to the affair, they have been able to reestablish their friendship after the affair ended—and after all aspects of the situation were fully discussed and deal with.

In some instances where the third party is a co-worker of the *spouse* of the person who had an affair, they have been able to reestablish a "friendly" (civil/professional) relationship.

Now, to focus on the specific question regarding the person who had an affair remaining friends with the third party: I know of no instance where this has been "successful" in terms of the impact on the marriage. Even if it doesn't cause the end of the marriage, it invariably takes a high toll on the spouse and adversely affects the quality of the marital relationship. The strength of the connection between the married couple is strongly correlated with the *lack* of connection between the person who had an affair and the third party.

Is it possible to abruptly end it?

Question:

It's been 8 months since my husband's 2 year affair. He says there was no love there and ended the relationship when I found out. Is it possible to have a sexual and phone companion for so long and not be emotionally involved. I question his abruptly discontinuing affair with no contact on both sides after being sexually involved for so long. Is this possible?

Peggy's Response:

Regardless of whether or not there was an "emotional involvement"—once an affair is discovered, it's certainly possible to abruptly discontinue the affair with no additional contact. Actually, this abrupt discontinuation of contact can be a positive indicator for the future—since it's usually a sign of a clear desire to maintain the marriage.

The particular nature of the connection prior to discovery (whether sexual, phone companion, and/or emotional involvement) has very little impact on what will happen *after* discovery. There may have been very little clarity about the actual basis of the connection prior to discovery, but afterwards there's an effort (in hindsight) to categorize its nature—which may or may not be accurate.

In fact, it may not be until discovery that there's even an effort to make an assessment of the nature of the connection—in light of its impact on the marriage. And actions speak louder than words. For instance, a reluctance to "let go" of the connection (whatever it's nature) may indicate some ambivalence about wholeheartedly committing to rebuilding the marriage—while totally severing ties with the third party usually indicates a clear commitment to the marriage.

Not only is this the pattern I've observed through the years, but it's what I personally experienced as well. At the time my husband told me about his affairs, he was still involved in one relationship that had spanned a period of 4 years (with 2 of them being intensely involved). Nevertheless, he called her (allowing me to be present during the call) to let her know that he had told me about the affairs and would not be seeing her or talking to her any more in the future. That was 26 years ago—and they haven't spoken since that call.

So while everyone would wish there had never been a connection in the first place, a willingness to abruptly end the connection is not so much a reflection of the nature of the previous connection as it's a reflection on the nature of the future commitment to the marriage.

How do I know it's over?

Question:

My husband says he has ended his affair—but I still don't trust him. How can I really believe him and trust that he has indeed broken off the relationship?

Peggy's Response:

It's completely understandable that there's difficulty in trusting what someone says—once trust has been broken in this way. Partly, this is because it's not just a question of not trusting the spouse, it's also a question of not trusting your own instincts. Once someone has been deceived, there's a tendency to feel foolish at having trusted in the first place—and a fear of "letting their guard down" again.

As I've said before, trust is not something you "bestow" on someone. The old "blind trust" is gone, and it can only be rebuilt on the basis of ongoing honesty about this and all important issues. Trust depends on developing a real "knowing" of each other, instead of guessing/hoping where things stand.

The best first step toward this "knowing" is for the concerned spouse to have some clear indication of the formal "ending" of the outside relationship—other than simply "believing" whatever statements are made about it ending. This might include either being personally present when a clear statement is made to end the relationship—or (as happened in my own case) being on the phone when the third party is told it's over.

Even with that kind of beginning, it will take time, patience, and ongoing evidence that a partner is now "trustworthy" before someone can reasonably trust that there is no further deception. For instance, it's important that the person who had an affair is honest about any and all interactions there might still be with the former lover. If the third party contacts them in any way, it's important to share this information. This alleviates the anxiety about "wondering" what contact there might have been.

The bottom line is that simply saying "it's over" (with no further discussion) is not at all reassuring. On the other hand, the more forthcoming the person who had the affair (and the more ongoing sharing of information related to this situation), the easier it becomes to *believe* that it's really over and to rebuild the trust that has been broken.

What are his true feelings?

Question:

Would you please address the feelings the affair person has after the affair has ended. What are their honest feelings regarding the affair? Do they still desire the other person, and for how long? Do they stay in the marriage as a sense of obligation and still desire the other person? For how long--forever? When my husband holds me is he really thinking of her? I think many of us would really like to know what the true feelings of the wayward spouse really are.

Peggy's Response:

So many honest questions in the above letter...and so few answers to be had. Naturally, the general answer is that the experience is different for different people. There is no one pattern of feelings about the affair or the third party on the part of the spouse who has had an affair—after the affair has ended.

While some people who have had affairs struggle with the issues raised in the above letter after the affair ends, this does not apply to everyone. Other people are filled with guilt and regret after their spouse learns of the affair and finally come to grips with the full impact of what they have done. In fact, for many people, it's only after the affair is known by the spouse that the "fantasy" nature of the affair finally becomes "reality."

As strange as it may seem, it's not until the spouse learns of an affair that the person having the affair fully comes to grips with the risk that has been taken—and the potential consequences of that risk. While the affair is still in progress, most people try to ignore, deny, or rationalize the possible ultimate impact of their actions, focusing only "on the moment." In fact, blocking out the possible consequences is often an essential part of being able to proceed with the affair.

NOW—to address some of the questions raised about the "feelings" of the person who had the affair after it has ended...

What are their honest feelings regarding the affair?

Many people have a lot of conflicting feelings about the affair, so any "clear-cut" articulation of the feelings is probably impossible. (Usually, they don't know exactly what they were feeling even while they were having the affair—so it's unlikely that they have a lot of clarity afterwards.)

Do they still desire the other person, and for how long--forever? When my husband holds me is he really thinking of her?

There may also be no way to be sure about whatever lingering desire or thoughts may exist about the other person. Whatever thoughts/feelings they still have for the third party are likely to continue until *all* contact with the third party is severed. Severing contact allows "new thoughts/feelings/memories" to be built with the spouse. (This is only one of the reasons that "severing contact with the third party" is so critical. Another is that it continues to create anxiety and pain for the spouse.)

Do they stay in the marriage as a sense of obligation?

There are *many* reasons a person may decide to stay married (even if they still have some feelings for the other person). While obligation *may* play a part, there are also likely to be a number of other reasons that have to do with valuing the spouse, the family, and the life they have built together. Frankly, these practical factors involved in deciding to stay married represent clear thinking about what's ultimately important in life. In fact, sometimes people don't come to fully appreciate what they have until they almost lose it.

What is the best way to end an affair?

Question:

My husband swears the affair meant nothing to him—that he loves me & our children and never intended anything permanent with her. When he called and told her it was over, she didn't believe he really meant it; she said he was only doing it because I forced him to. But I didn't make him do it—and I want her to know that. I don't want her to go around thinking that the only reason he stopped was because I stopped it. Should he or I write to her, call her, ignore her or what?

Peggy's Response:

First of all, it's extremely positive when a third party is informed directly that the affair is over. Certainly, it's better that the husband was the one to inform the third party of the end of the affair. It would be unlikely for the third party to be able to hear anything the wife in this situation would say directly to her. That would be sure to be interpreted as coming only from the wife without the husband's support.

Nevertheless, it's understandable to want the third party to "know the score" in hopes that it will prevent "thinking that the only reason he stopped was because I stopped it." However, it's unlikely that any effort to clarify things would succeed. The nature of perception is that we bring our own belief system to whatever is said or done. So any effort to clarify the situation would probably not be interpreted by the third party in the way it is intended since each person brings their own interpretation to any situation. The result of additional contact would be likely to leave things even more unclear and create even more of a desire to get it cleared up.

It's a good guess that nothing is actually lost by not having additional contact with the third party. *any* additional contact could potentially stimulate some kind of action, in keeping with the old saying that "whatever you feed is what will grow." So "feeding" the contact with her could serve to cause it to continue. It's probably better to put energy into working on the marriage instead of using it to continue focusing on the third party.

What can we do to stop contact?

Question:

My H has cut off all contact with Other Woman. She does not call him, but writes me anonymous letters that are very upsetting to me. What, if anything should we do/can we do?

Peggy's Response:

As with most aspects of dealing with an affair, there is nothing specific that "should" be done in a situation like this. But there are some things that "can" be done to minimize the impact of this continuing effort to maintain some kind of contact.

In general, it's more effective to make no response to contact by the third party—even anonymously. That's because usually any kind of response tends to reinforce the efforts by the third party to continue some kind of contact. (Of course, if the contact is by anonymous letter, then it may not even be possible to respond. But if there were to be any response, it would be to return the letter—Unopened.)

However, since the primary problem in a case like the one described in this question is the fact that the letters are upsetting—then there *is* something that can be done: Don't open them and don't read them. Simply destroy them as soon as they arrive. While it may still be somewhat upsetting to have the letters arrive in the first place, reading them is sure to be far more upsetting than simply throwing them away. So treating the letters as if they are of "No Importance" can go a long way toward diminishing the power of this contact to be upsetting.

Dealing with running into the third party?

Question #1: (from spouse)

Peggy, did you or your husband ever run into any of the other women? If so, what did you do? Does James have real feelings for the woman in his first affair? Since she was the most prominent. I am scared of running into the other women, and especially my husband's reaction to them. What can I do?

Question #2: (from spouse)

If the third party lives in the same town, will we have to move to stop the obsessive thoughts? Every time I see her or her husband or kids it fuels the fire.

Question #3: (from third party)

I have been the third party. I moved across the country and severed ties completely 8 months ago. I still own my home around the corner from this family. How do I face this man's wife in the neighborhood? How do I live with this lie to her?

Peggy's Response:

First, I'll respond to the personal question in Question #1 (about whether I ever ran into any of the other women and whether James has feelings for the woman in his first affair).

Out of all James's affairs, I only saw or interacted with one of the women—and that was only *before* I “knew for sure” about the affair. However, I strongly suspected it and was in great pain every time I saw her—which was often because she worked at the same University with him and we were both involved in many social events. But since I supposedly didn't “know,” I acted as normally as possible—as if nothing could be further from my mind.

Of course, once the third party knows that you know, acting in a “normal” way may not be a reasonable option. Since it's important (for your own well-being) to avoid wasting any of your energy focusing on her, the healthiest thing is to simply ignore her. (This doesn't mean being obviously snobbish or rude; it means simply “seeing right through her” as if she doesn't exist.) This is easier to do when you first accept for yourself the fact that “she's not important” as a person; it's only the fantasy role she played that gave her any significance.

Most people have a hard time dealing with their feelings about the third party because they tend to think that an affair wouldn't have happened at all if it hadn't been for that particular person. But the specific third party doesn't warrant our obsession with them because, in fact, they're not “special.” Any number of people could have been the third party. The very nature of being the third party (instead of the spouse) means it's a fantasy relationship without the daily concerns and responsibilities required in making a life together in marriage.

For more perspective on this these Articles posted on my website:

“The Other Woman or the Other Man” and “Comparisons with the Third Party.”

As for his first affair... he has no special feelings about her. (Note that that first affair began in 1966, 38 years ago!) Actually, the one woman I knew was his last and longest affair, and the first one was only significant in being “first.” But whatever his feelings for any of the women at the time of the affairs, they changed dramatically after he told me. When he thought I “didn't know and therefore wasn't being hurt” (although I actually strongly suspected and was in great pain), he was able to indulge in fantasy feelings. But once I knew, then reality set in for him and his feelings for the other women were no longer an issue.

Regarding the issue of dealing with the "obsessive thoughts" (as in Question #2)...

As the above articles show, obsessing on any particular third party gives them far more importance than they deserve. In my own case, my husband had affairs with about 15 different women. In some ways that seems overwhelming to deal with; but on the other hand, it allowed me to avoid focusing on any one person. Instead, I was able to see that their importance was only in the role they played, not in who played it. This perspective might be helpful in dealing with the strong emotions about the third party.

Also, it's a little like the old question of whether the glass is half empty or half full. Our feelings tend to follow our focus. So more of an effort to focus on the present and the future (instead of the past) can go a long way toward diminishing the strength of the negative feelings about the third party. While the third party may continue to be an irritation, no matter what, it might not feel quite so distressful if it's viewed as something that only serves to make you stronger as a couple. An attitude of "It's you and me against the world" can be very powerful in withstanding anything.

It might help to realize that our brain doesn't discriminate between actually experiencing an event and only thinking about it. So the best motivation for letting go of the emotional obsession is to recognize the damaging impact on your own body. It causes a repetition of all the pain that was felt originally—just as if it were happening all over again. And unresolved anger can just eat you up inside.

Regarding Question #3 (from the third party)...

As this letter shows, it's also difficult to be the "ex"-third party. Even when the affair has ended, contact has been severed—and she has even "moved across the country," she is still plagued by concerns as to how to behave if/when she sees the wife.

As laid out in the above responses to the spouse, it's better to let the spouse determine the contact (if any). If a spouse proceeds as I've suggested, then you would not have to "face her" because she would go about her business without addressing you directly. (And you would not initiate any contact.) However, if she DOES address you, your response would be based on the nature of her comments. If she approaches you in a civil manner, you can simply be civil in return. If she approaches you in a "how could you/how dare you" mode, then (in your own words) say you're very sorry about what you did and you've taken steps to remove yourself from their lives and focus on getting on with your own life; and that you hope she will soon be able to do the same. (Since there is probably nothing you can say that will make her feel better, except possibly repeating that you're sorry, your goal is to avoid saying anything that will make her feel worse.)

As for *"how you can live with this lie to her..."*

My advice is similar to that for the spouse. It's important for you to focus on your own future and not dwell on the past beyond the point of what you learned from it that will help you avoid making such mistakes in the future. You can forgive yourself over time if you deliberately use this experience to become a stronger, better person.

Why do I still hate the Other Woman?

Question:

I have been divorced for two years and I still have a lot of anger toward the other woman. While I know she is not the person to whom my feelings should be directed, I simply cannot shake the thoughts that she is evil. Why can't I let this go? How do I?

Peggy's Response:

The first thought I have upon reading about this situation is that the reader displays a clear "understanding" of the situation, but her "emotions" have simply not yet caught up. We tend to think there's something wrong when our emotions don't just fall in line with what we understand to be true. (For instance, in this case there's an understanding that "she is not the person to whom my feelings should be directed," but there's still the emotion that "she is evil.")

There is almost always a gap between our rational understanding of something and our emotional acceptance of it. It's not easy to drop the "if only..." and "what if.." kind of thinking that leads to dwelling on past experiences and reliving them long after they have ended. Unfortunately, our brain doesn't discriminate between actually experiencing an event and only thinking about it. So the best motivation for letting go of the emotional obsession is to recognize the damaging impact on your own body. It causes a repetition of all the pain that was felt originally—just as if it were happening all over again.

Also, anger just eats you up inside. So whenever the angry feelings involuntarily come to mind, it's possible to deliberately, voluntarily focus on whatever positive things you can find in your life. It's a little like the old question of whether the glass is half empty or half full. Our feelings tend to follow our focus. So more of an effort to focus on the present and the future (instead of the past) can go a long way toward diminishing the strength of the negative feelings about the other woman.

How can I reach closure regarding the third party?

Question:

Once you have forgiven your spouse and are on the road to recovery, what are some ways in dealing with the third party towards whom you have so much hate and resentment? They never had to answer our questions and face us as our spouses did and how do we overcome the childish thoughts about contacting them to let them know it wasn't real and your spouse only loves you? I am having such a hard time finding closure to this part. It kills me to think it was left with her thinking he loved her.

Peggy's Response:

It's quite common for a spouse to focus on the third party and to want some kind of closure. However, none of the typical scenarios (wherein the third party "learns" something or "gets something straight" or "gets some kind of comeuppance") are realistic. The writer is correct in recognizing the need to "overcome the childish thoughts" about getting this kind of closure.

The best way to reach closure is to consciously stop yourself every time you begin to focus on the third party. When the thought initially comes, you can let the focus intensify to the point of obsessing—or you can deliberately stop focusing on the third party. The more time and energy spent focusing on the third party, the more power you are giving them. And the whole point is to diminish their power to affect your life in any way.

As I've mentioned before: "what we feed is what grows"—so feeding the focus on the third party just intensifies that focus. It's much better to reach a rational acceptance of the fact that none of the wished-for scenarios are realistic—and deliberately fight to reject the emotional impulse to interact with the third party.

Also, it helps to recognize that people tend to believe what they want to believe. So if the third party wanted to believe that it was "real," there's probably nothing anyone could say that would change that perception. (There are many ways for the third party to deflect/deny the truth of any statement that might be made after the affair ended if it fails to jibe with their perception of the experience.) So any actual effort to find closure with the third party is useless at best and harmful at worst.

Reaching closure does not depend on anything being said between you. Meaningful closure is accomplished by having no contact with the third party.

What can be done to the other man—to pay a price?

Question:

My wife had an affair about a year ago. Everyone has endured pain and had to pay a price for this affair. Everyone except the other man. He has done something terribly wrong, and illegal, and has paid no price for this. What can be done to him, so that some justice can be served?

Peggy's Response:

The emotions expressed above are quite understandable—especially when someone is in pain. However, when we have suffered some hurt or loss, no action against the other person is going to take away the hurt or restore the loss. In fact, the intensity of the desire for "justice" (revenge?) may serve to simply reinforce the pain, extending its power over our lives.

Another reason to try to overcome the desire to cause harm to the other person is that "what we feed is what grows." So continuing to focus (obsess) on the third party tends to drain our energy and distract us from dealing with other important issues/people in our lives.

Sometimes we feel compelled to take some kind of action "on principle." But when that's the primary basis, it's usually triggered almost exclusively by emotion—without being balanced with thoughtful, rational considerations. In fact, it's often a self-destructive attitude, in essence being willing to "cut off my nose to spite my face."

Of course, if the third party's behavior is ongoing/continuing, then it's reasonable to take some kind of action to stop the behavior. (Or if it's unquestionably illegal, then appropriate legal action may be in order.) But when we continue to allow someone else to control our emotions (even after their hurtful behavior has ended), we are in essence letting them continue to have power over us.

So in considering how to "pay back" someone who has caused us pain; it's probably more useful to think about ourselves instead of them; remembering that "living well is the best revenge." So focusing less on the other person—and more on ourselves and our own lives—is likely to be the best "justice" of all.

What if old feelings return?

Question:

My husband has admitted to an affair that has been ongoing for over a year with an out of state colleague but we are working things out and he has ended the affair. We have the opportunity to move within the next year with his company to the same city in which "she" lives. I want to start our life over and go forward as he does, but I'm concerned his old feelings with her will be renewed. He says they won't. He said he won't make that mistake again. Would this move be a bad decision?

Peggy's Response:

It's understandable to be concerned that his old feelings might be renewed, despite his genuine reassurance that it won't happen—because unfortunately, people's "intentions" don't *always* determine their future behavior. (For instance, most people don't "intend" to have an affair in the first place.) So anything that *supports* the ability to act on the intention, rather than *challenging* it, is probably preferable.

But there's another consideration that may be even more relevant. Even if the feelings are *not* renewed, the ongoing uncertainty/anxiety about that "possibility" may make it very difficult to pursue the goal stated above: "to start our life over and go forward." Also, even if there were some kind of "guarantee" against reviving the feelings, there's still the potential for delaying the recovery process by having the constant "reminder" of the affair—by virtue of living in the same city, especially if this involves even more exposure through work. This kind of ongoing reminder can re-open the wounded feelings and make it more difficult to heal—a little like having a scab continually torn off, delaying the healing of any wound.

Of course, *any* decision needs to be based on considering *all* the factors involved. So it's impossible to say whether this would be a "bad" decision *overall*. Since all decisions involve trade-offs, it comes down to a matter of "priorities." If rebuilding the relationship is truly the first priority, then a decision to make this kind of move might "feel" like a "bad" decision—even though it would otherwise be a good one.

Is it OK to remain friends with the third party?

Question:

After reading the Monogamy Myth someone was quoting the info as: "Absolute honesty means it is OK for my spouse to remain friends with the third party if my spouse tells me everything they say to each other." I think they have missed the point.

Peggy's Response:

The above letter is not specifically a question—but it raises a very important point. (And, yes, the person quoting the info from "The Monogamy Myth" completely "missed the point.")

To begin with, let me clarify that I never used the term "absolute honesty" anywhere in "The Monogamy Myth." Even more important, among the many references I made to the importance of honesty in a relationship, I never said it was "OK for a spouse to remain friends with the third party"—whether or not "the spouse tells everything they say to each other."

I do talk about the importance of honestly sharing with a spouse any feelings of attraction, temptation, etc. that may help prevent an affair. But I have never supported continued contact with a third party after an affair has already taken place.

Here are some of the many articles posted on my Website where I clarify the importance of not only NOT remaining friends with the third party, but actually severing all contact:

“Peggy's Overview of Affairs”

The second bullet under "Rebuilding the Marriage" is:

"Severing contact with the third party and building trust through actions, not promises."

“The long road to recovery”

The second sentence in the paragraph under "Regarding recovering the Marriage" is:

"The first step is severing contact with the third party..."

“Common Patterns in Dealing with Affairs”

One of the sentences under item #7 is:

"Some factors that make a difference are: willingness to answer questions, hanging in through the inevitable emotional impact, and severing contact with the third party."

“How Can You Ever Rebuild Trust after an Affair?”

The third item in the indented list is:

"demonstrating a commitment to the relationship by severing contact with the other person."

How can I deal with wanting to contact the other woman?

Question:

How can I work through the urge to contact the woman with whom my husband had the affair? I have this overwhelming need to tell her exactly how I feel.

Peggy's Response:

I receive many questions about this particular issue—and I have responded several times in the past. However, since this continues to be a big issue for a lot of people, I will address it again.

There's an understandable desire to confront the third party, thinking it will either "get through to them" in a way that they can see/understand the consequences of their actions or that saying something to the third party will at least alleviate some of the intense feelings (obsessions) about them. However, the typical scenario (wherein you can say something that really "get through to the third party" or "gets something straight") isn't very realistic.

The common wisdom (with which I agree) is that the best course of action is to make absolutely *no* contact with the third party. While you may not be able to stop thoughts of the third party from coming in the first place, you can certainly do something about dealing with those thoughts when they do come. When the thought initially comes, you can let the focus intensify to the point of obsessing—or you can deliberately stop focusing on the third party. So every time you begin to focus on the third party, it's important to consciously stop yourself and deliberately fight to reject the emotional impulse to interact with them.

One way to help yourself in making this effort is to recognize that focusing on the third party serves to distract from the important effort of working toward rebuilding the marriage. It's much more effective to use all the available energy in focusing on the marriage, not on the third party. Also, the more time and energy spent focusing on the third party, the more power you are giving them. And the whole point is to diminish their power to affect your life in any way.

Am I wrong to want to see what the other woman looks like?

Question:

I want to see what the other woman looks like. My husband and I made up, but I feel I cannot have any closure until I see what she looks like. I feel I'll never get over this unless I see her. I want to see what I was up against (I think), or maybe what it is that she had that he was so willing to give up what we had for her. Do you think I'm wrong?

Peggy's Response:

Many of the questions people have about dealing with an affair (like this one, wondering if it's "wrong" to want to see the other woman), seem to come from a position of wondering whether they're wrong to think a certain thing or want a certain thing or do a certain thing. In fact, it's not so much a matter of whether something is "right" or "wrong"—but whether it's "smart." By whether it's "smart," I mean whether it generally "works"—meaning whether it serves to move the process along in effectively coping with this experience.

In this particular instance (wanting to see what the other woman looks like), the important consideration is why there is the desire to know about her appearance. If it were simply out of general curiosity or to "fill in the gaps" by having a mental image instead of wondering/imagining, then it might be helpful. But if, as indicated above, it's to compare yourself with her or to see what she had that he was willing to take the risk—then it's probably *not* helpful.

Basically, the reason these kinds of comparisons are not helpful is that the main attraction of anyone who is the other woman is not because of her appearance or particular traits. It's just that she had the "role" of "other woman" (with all the newness, fantasy and freedom that goes with that role) while you have the "role" of "wife" (with the shared real-world responsibilities and ongoing nature of a long relationship).

As for wondering "why he was so willing to give up what we had for her"—it's highly unlikely that there was any clear focus on "giving up what we had." Many people having affairs (especially men) never stop to think about the risk to their marriage. It may seem impossible, but quite often they block out any focus on the potential consequences of the affair. They just get caught up in it, never thinking of the risk or of having to "choose."

Also, focusing so much on the third party gives them far more power than they deserve. Third parties are not "special" or "unique," they're simply "different" (primarily because of the different role), so there's no basis for comparing. Also, it's extremely shortsighted to think (regardless of what a spouse may say) that the affair only happened because of some lack in you or in the marriage.

To get more perspective on the reasons for affairs, read these Articles posted on the Website:

“Why do people have affairs?” and “On meeting your partner's needs.”

Should I believe my husband or the other woman?

Question:

The other woman called to me in a parking lot and said, "you don't know me but I have been your husband's girlfriend for 10 months. I didn't know he was married. He lied to us both." (She did know.) She had pictures of them smiling together. He says it was to get even because he broke it off with her. She says she felt I "had the right to know." In your experience, who would you be more likely to believe? I had NO idea. I was totally devastated! This whole thing has me messed up!

Peggy's Response:

In a situation where it's usually difficult to believe *anyone*, this may be a case where *both* people can be believed. The other woman may really believe that you "had the right to know." And the husband may really believe that she did it "to get even." In either (or both) cases, the person may be rationalizing, but each one may think they're telling the truth - as they see it. Unfortunately, everyone has their own unique perception of any event that may or may not match another person's perception of it. (For more perspective on this concept, see the article on the website titled "The Power of Perception.")

In the final analysis, the question of "who to believe" (regarding the reason the other woman told the wife) is far less important than many other issues to be faced and resolved. But the misplaced emphasis on "who to believe" may be explained by the reference at the end of the letter to being "totally devastated." It's understandable that people feel "messed up" and unable to think clearly upon first learning of a spouse's affair.

Also, being distracted by focusing on the reason for telling may be a way of coping until feeling ready to face the serious questions regarding how to deal with the information. However, each person can only address this challenge after the initial shock wears off. At that time, the fact that the spouse had an affair will be the important focus - not how that fact was revealed.

In the meantime, the challenge is to simply survive the initial trauma of this new reality of your life. This involves focusing on simple survival factors: taking care of yourself by trying to eat, sleep and function. This stage usually takes several months, after which a person is better able to begin thinking more clearly and making better decisions about how to deal with this experience.

How should I react if I run into the other woman?

Question:

If I run into my husband's former fling, how should I react? Should I act like there is nothing wrong or should I act like I don't know anything? I don't know if she is aware that I know what happened or not. I don't know what to do.

Peggy's Response:

In general, it's preferable *not* to have any interactions with a husband's "former fling." (That's because the best way to deal with affairs and to recover from them is to sever all contact with the third party.)

But if contact is unavoidable, then it depends on the nature of the contact. If it's strictly visual contact (just seeing the other person), then it's usually better not to make a specific effort to speak to her.

However, if the contact involves any verbal communication, then it's unreasonable to "pretend" that nothing is wrong and that you don't know anything. This doesn't mean making a scene or giving a lecture or getting revenge, it simply means acknowledging the fact that you do know.

In fact, the "knowing" what has happened (and letting others know that you know) can be a source of personal strength in recovering from this experience. It can also serve as a testament to the developing honesty between husband and wife. And this kind of honesty can serve to strengthen the connection and the bond of the marriage.

Also, it's better not to perpetuate the overall secrecy about affairs. The general secrecy in our society (where people hide the reality of affairs and pretend they didn't happen) only serves to provide fertile ground for affairs - because people can more easily pretend there are no consequences. So the more people can be open about their experiences with affairs and the reality of the impact of affairs on their lives, the more this whole issue can come out of the shadows and be addressed more responsibly by society as a whole.

What do I do when she still "talks" to the other man?

Question:

My wife had an affair last year and now I was contacted by his wife that she found out that they have been talking again. It seems that they had met a few times before work. They don't work the same place anymore but still work the same shift. I confronted my wife about the message I had received and at first she denied everything. On pushing her harder she finally admitted that they had met a few times and "Only" talked about how things were going. What do I do now?

Peggy's Response:

This issue of continued contact with the third party is one of the most important factors in determining whether or not a couple can rebuild their marriage. So it's legitimate to insist that severing all contact is critical—regardless of any disclaimers that it's "only" this or "only" that. The particular nature of the contact makes little difference; it's the contact itself (and the secrecy surrounding it) that makes it a serious problem.

The very fact that there is continuing contact indicates an unwillingness to take responsibility for the affair and its consequences. As I've written in the past, taking responsibility means acknowledging that her actions (in having an affair) are the cause of the pain being experienced by her spouse, and therefore it's up to her to do whatever it takes to help alleviate that pain.

Further, alleviating the pain usually involves taking certain specific actions—and the very first one is severing contact with the third party. (The second is answering whatever questions are asked, and the third is supporting the spouse through the long process of overcoming the emotional impact of this experience.)

A case like the one above (where not only is there contact, but there's lying about it when asked), indicates one of two things: either a failure to recognize the importance of severing all contact (being unaware)—or a lack of caring about its impact on the spouse (being uncaring). Being either "unaware" or "uncaring" is damaging to the prospects for recovery or for rebuilding the marriage.

As for "what to do now," there's no simple solution that's guaranteed to work. But a good beginning is to simply lay out the significance of this issue as described above. Also, it might help to explain that additional contact is like tearing the scab off a wound, making it impossible for it to heal. And if there's still an unwillingness to sever contact after clearly describing why it's important to do so, then this would indicate a lack of caring about the spouse's needs for recovery or about rebuilding the marriage.

The partner needs to not only stop initiating any contact, but also make it clear to the third party that they are not to initiate contact either. And if, despite this clear indication, the third party tries to make contact, it's important that this information be shared with the spouse immediately. This at least alleviates the anxiety about "wondering" what contact there might have been. (Simply having contact and keeping it secret and/or lying about it only makes it worse.)

Ending an Affair

Question:

What is the best way to end an affair? When I found out (after she called the house because he hadn't been calling her), he then called her and told her that it was over in my presence. She screamed at him and accused him of treating her "like a piece of meat." The call only lasted a couple of minutes and there was really no conversation or explanation. Should we just let it go at that?

I am so hurt and disappointed and am suffering with all of the symptoms you have written about in your books. We are seeing a therapist whose attitude seems to me to be that we're just waiting for me to "get over it." My husband swears he loves me and our children and grandchildren—and never intended anything permanent with her, (it just got out of hand and was primarily a phone relationship), and he wanted to end it long ago but just didn't have the guts because he was afraid of what she would do. But I feel that I want her to know that. I don't want her to go around thinking that the only reason he stopped was because I stopped it. Should he or I write to her, call her, ignore her or what???? Please help me.

Peggy's Response:

First of all, it's extremely positive when a third party is informed directly that the affair is over. And it's an extra bonus for the spouse to be able to hear it firsthand. (I personally had that experience when my husband called to inform a woman he had had an affair with that he was "out of circulation." He did it in my presence, which left me no doubts as to just what he said, etc.) Certainly, it's better that the husband was the one to inform the third party of the end of the affair. It would be unlikely for the third party to be able to hear anything the wife in this situation would say directly to her because that would surely be interpreted as coming only from the wife without the husband's full support.

Nevertheless, it's understandable to want the third party to "know the score" in hopes that it will prevent "thinking that the only reason he stopped was because I stopped it." Based on the description of the third party in this letter, it seems unlikely that any effort to clarify things with her would succeed. The nature of perception is that we bring our own belief system to whatever is said or done. So any effort to clarify the situation would probably not be interpreted by the third party in the way it is intended. The result of additional contact would be likely to leave things even more unclear and create even more of a desire to get it cleared up.

It's a good guess that nothing is actually lost by not having additional contact with the third party. Any additional contact could potentially stimulate some kind of action (based on the husband's comment about not having the guts to end the affair earlier because "he was afraid of what she would do"). There's an old saying that "whatever you feed is what will grow." So feeding the contact with her could serve to cause it to continue. In this instance, probably "no news is good news." If the third party is never heard from again, that would likely be a good outcome.

Finally, the therapist's attitude of just waiting for a person to "get over it," shows the importance of finding a therapist who has a better understanding of how to deal with the issue of extramarital affairs. The therapist's attitude described above is useless at best and harmful at worst. Most people, both professionals and those dealing with it personally, need to get more information, understanding and perspective about the whole issue of affairs.

Why was my husband able to open up with his lover but not with me?

Question:

My question has to do with the change in personality of a person taking part in an affair, compared to the person who you know from prior to the affair and even know when they are back home again. How is it that my husband was able to completely open up and be emotional with his lover but he isn't that way with me, even though it's me he says he wants to be with?

Peggy's Response:

It's much easier to be honest in an affair because people don't have to be concerned about long-term consequences. They have less at stake. Here's the irony of ironies. Sincerely intent on limiting their involvement in an affair, they present themselves honestly to their illicit lover.

This kind of honesty can be appealing and attractive. There's a sense of well-being that comes from being accepted for who you are without pretense. Very few seem to achieve that in marriage, but it's fairly commonplace in affairs. (Of course, it's much easier to accept someone and "be ourselves" when there's not so much at stake.)

So marriages sometimes suffer from comparison with affairs on this dimension. Honesty in an affair may make a dishonest marriage relationship look too messy and complicated to clean up and lead some to give up too soon. But comparisons are deceptive.

In an affair people create a little space in their lives where they can really devote themselves to physical and emotional pleasure. Knowing that the relationship doesn't carry over into other areas of their lives makes it easy to pour their energy into the time they do commit to it. It's as if they're saying, "Let's pretend these other areas of our lives don't exist. Let's just enjoy the time we have together without cluttering it with all the mundane problems of living." (What a difference between that and the attitudes associated with the marriage vows most of us took. "For better or for worse, 'til death do us part.")

But while an affair can provide enjoyment for a little while, marriage is forever! And many find out too late that ending a burdensome marriage to pursue an affair as their primary relationship doesn't really solve anything. When the affair becomes a full-time thing, it frequently takes on the same qualities the marriage had. That's because there's a certain make-believe quality to an affair, whereas marriage is for real.

(Note: The above ideas were first expressed by James in our 1980 book titled *Beyond Affairs*.)

Finding a soulmate???

(I often receive questions about "finding a soulmate" - so am printing some of them before responding to this issue.)

Question # 1

My wife regarded her lover as her soulmate and wanted to leave me for him. This is more hurtful to me than the sex and lies. How can I/we recover from this thinking?

Question # 2

How do I become my wife's soulmate and best friend. This is how she described her lover, but at the moment I feel I have never been nor never will be this to her.

Question # 3

Is our situation hopeless? My wife has only just said 'Goodbye' to her lover 9 months after telling me of her affair, and she is now depressed. She feels that with me, she will never be able to recreate the intimate bond that she had with this person (her soulmate and best friend).

Question # 4

My wife had a "telephone" affair and felt the other person was the proverbial "soul mate." Although she professes deep love and respect for me and vows to work on our relationship, her sense of loss of the "soul mate" continues to cause problems. How can I get her to realize the soulmate was simply the thrill of "new love" and that Letting Go is the only solution to our damaged marriage?

Question # 5

How many relationships that start as affairs end up in marriage. I'm a married woman involved with a married man. We seem to be soulmates or am I deceiving myself?

Peggy's Response:

It's common when people have an affair to mistakenly think they've "found their soulmate." But there's no such thing as finding a soulmate. People may become soulmates, but only after a great deal of time, commitment, and experience in developing deep trust and true intimacy. (This cannot be achieved quickly; in fact, it's quite rare for couples to truly become soulmates.)

The kind of intimacy that develops when people disclose themselves to each other in an affair (or in the early stages of any relationship) is based on a fantasy image of the other person, not on a reasonable perception of them. Frankly, you don't even "know" them in any real sense—because when people are in affairs, they present a side of themselves that's not representative of the whole person. It's a special version of their best aspects, free from the normal responsibilities involved in sharing a total life situation. With no shared history and no joint responsibilities at stake, it's easy to develop an initial (superficial) feeling of intimacy or of being "in love." But those feelings are related to the "newness" of the relationship, not to the specific person involved.

It's common to fantasize about what it would be like to have whatever we think is currently missing in our lives. For instance, in the book/movie "Bridges of Madison County," the woman married to a simple homebody husband had an affair with the world-roving reporter. (And it was implied that the reporter was her soulmate.) However, you can be sure that had the housewife been married to the world-roving reporter all those years, she would have jumped at the chance to fulfill what was missing in her life (which would have been the quiet, caring, constant attention of a simple man who stayed at home like the husband in this movie).

Regarding the specific question above as to "how many relationships that start as affairs end up in marriage..." I will repeat what I've written in the past: Only about 10 percent of the people who leave a spouse actually wind up marrying the third party. And if they do marry the third party, they frequently learn much later (after the third party takes on the role of spouse) that their specialness had more to do with their earlier role than with the person themselves. Many people have an illusion that this new person is their soulmate, only to discover after a few years that all the old feelings and issues are there just as in the past. They didn't really change games at all, they only changed the players. So today's third party may be tomorrow's spouse who is unhappy in their marriage.

Finally, the idea that "everyone in the world has a soulmate out there" or that any particular relationship was "meant to be" is just a romantic illusion, not rooted in reality. There's no such thing as one special person who is meant to be your soulmate, so it's useless to spend time thinking/hoping that's the case. The chance of finding a soulmate through an affair is even less likely than winning the lottery and a lot more costly. So it's much wiser to go about developing the kind of long-term relationship that provides the possibility of becoming soulmates—rather than the fantasy of thinking you can find one.

Why won't he tell me who she is?

Question:

My husband refuses to tell me who he had an affair with. He says the affair is over and that it doesn't matter who she is because he is committed to rebuilding our marriage. His reason for not telling me who she is is that he doesn't want to ruin another person's life. What do you make of this?

Peggy's Response:

Refusing to answer such a basic question about an affair makes it very difficult for a couple to come together and recover from this experience. The importance of answering whatever questions a spouse asks is very important in determining the degree to which the marriage can be rebuilt. Simply saying he is "committed to rebuilding our marriage" is empty without the actions that demonstrate that commitment.

Even if "the affair is over" and the person who had the affair thinks "it doesn't matter who she is..."—that's not a decision they have the right to make on behalf of the spouse. It's not that "knowing who she is" is so critical as far as that particular detail is concerned—but the willingness to tell "who she is" is extremely critical. Without demonstrating a willingness to take responsibility for what happened (by answering questions), it's unlikely that trust can be rebuilt.

For more information about being willing to answer questions, see the article under the "Articles about Affairs" section of the website titled "The Need to Know." (For evidence of the importance of this issue, see the article listed near the bottom of the home page of the website titled "Survey Report.")

Unfortunately, the stated reason for not telling who she is ("that he doesn't want to ruin another person's life") leads to an understandable feeling by the spouse that the person who had the affair cares more about the well-being of the third party than the well-being of the spouse. Obviously, this also contributes to the difficulty in rebuilding the marriage.

Of course, once the telling takes place, it's essential that the information is treated responsibly. In other words, the spouse needs to handle the details of the answers they get in a way that does not try to "ruin another person's life." It's simply not smart to use the honesty to "punish" anyone—either the person who honestly answered or the third party.

Despite the potential pain from the honesty, it's important to try to focus on the positive aspects of developing more honesty in the relationship rather than the negative aspects of the content of that honesty. Because the goal is not just to get the answer to this one question—but to establish a new way of relating based on making an ongoing commitment to honesty. And the first step in developing that kind of honesty is getting answers to basic questions like "who she is."

What about talking to the third party?

Question #1:

After 30 years my husband finally admitted that he had an affair. I know the woman and really would like to talk to her about it. Should I do this or is it too late?

Question #2:

I know the woman my husband had the affair with. After 8 months, I still have the burning need to let her know that I know. Direct and to the point. "He told me about the affair with you." Are there any issues on this subject of confronting the third party?

Peggy's Response:

You'll notice that both these letters are from women who are interested in talking to the "other woman." (This is much more likely to be the case with women than with men, since women have been trained to deal with interpersonal issues by talking through unresolved questions or feelings. Men, on the other hand, don't have this conditioning to verbally process their thoughts and feelings.)

To address the specific situations reflected in the above two questions...

1. *Is it too late to talk to the woman after 30 years.*

It's not the long delay that is the critical consideration; it's just that "in general" it's better to avoid contact with the third party. Rather than helping the recovery process, focusing too much on the third party may prolong it by giving them more importance and significance than is warranted (especially after such a long time). While it may feel like it would resolve something; it is more likely to stir up something that just adds another difficulty to deal with in addition to the struggle of just dealing with the reality of the fact of the affair.

2. *What about letting her know that I know?*

While it's understandable to want her to "know that you know," the same general considerations apply as above. If it continues to be a "burning need," then at some point you might consider writing a note with just the one sentence mentioned above: "He told me about the affair with you." (Nothing more!) Even this may lead to more interactions, which could go badly.

Here's an excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth* that provides more perspective on this issue:

When a woman decides to seek out the other woman, she's obviously taking a chance on being hurt even more if the meeting goes badly. One woman who made contact with the other woman greatly regretted her decision. At first the other woman wouldn't accept her calls, but she persisted. Finally, she met with the other woman, but the meeting was nothing like she expected (or hoped for). The other woman was not the least bit embarrassed or guilty about the affair. She flaunted details of places they had gone and things they had done together. She chided the wife for being so naive and trusting, and said she felt sure she knew her husband better than his wife knew him. Not surprisingly, the wife felt even worse after this encounter, which only served to increase her feelings of anger and frustration.

Since there's no way to predetermine the outcome of meeting the other woman, each person must decide for herself what she thinks is best. While it might be a mistake for some, for others it might work out very well. It can diffuse the intensity of their feelings and give them a sense of the real person behind the image of "other woman."

Getting rid of the image of the third party as some kind of monster can be very beneficial in allowing a person to let go of the anger and hatred that may have been consuming them and

keeping them from using that energy to work on their own healing. Another purpose that may be served by this kind of face-to-face meeting is that it can restore a sense of pride to the wife who has felt inadequate. Confronting her adversary in person can give her a sense of strength that offsets her feelings of being weak and helpless.

(end of excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*)

So each person must carefully consider the pros and cons for themselves in deciding what to do. It's just that, as I said, in general it's better to concentrate your energies on dealing with the situation with your spouse rather than being distracted by the other woman.

What is the other woman thinking?

Question #1:

The facts and advice that you write concerning the third party about how affairs usually end is something that all mistresses should read. But wives can't exactly phone or e-mail our husband's mistresses and suggest she visit your web site. Where does a mistress go for a little insight on the devastation her involvement has caused? How long would you say it usually takes a mistress to figure out that if he's lied to his wife then he's lied to her, also? How many do you think care?

Question #2:

She knew he was married but did it anyway. She knew the pain and heartache the 1-yr affair caused his family, him, and herself. She "sent" him back because his wife seemed to be in between them. She wrote "Perhaps I should have said No in the beginning...but I wouldn't have missed it for the world!" She never stopped contact and the affair continued. What kind of a person would do this to another human? Is it for power, control, or just pure selfishness and disregard for others' feelings?

Peggy's Response:

These comments about the other woman paint her as a callous, uncaring human being. And while certainly there are insensitive people among those who play the role of the other woman, in most cases the other woman is more misguided and self-centered than downright malicious.

For instance, many women having affairs convince themselves that this man is their "soul mate" and therefore should belong to her. And further, that if he can't be hers, he won't be anyone else's. All the questions in the above letters basically saying, "Does she care?" or "How could someone do what she's done?" *assume* that she is actually thinking about you or the impact on you. But in fact, she's likely to be focusing only on herself (and what she needs/wants—not on you or the impact on you).

As unbelievable as it seems, most people involved in affairs—whether the spouse or the third party—are specifically *not* focusing on the fallout of their actions or the impact on others. That would make it more difficult to do what they're doing...so there's a general tendency to only focus on themselves and what they want, etc. This may involve a lot of denial and rationalization, but it allows them to avoid dealing with the consequences of their actions.

As those of you who have read much of my writing know, the third party's significance is primarily just in the "role" they play—not in the individual person playing the role. And the focus of your energy is much better spent on focusing on yourself and your spouse, *not* the third party. The less focus/attention you give them, the less you'll be negatively impacted by whatever they do or think. Frankly, focusing too much on them gives them more importance than they deserve...since, as I said, their relevance is only that they played this role in a "fantasy situation."

For more about the role of the third party, see the article under the "Articles about Affairs" section of the website titled "The Other Woman or the Other Man."

What does she look like?

Question #1:

It has been a year since I found out that my husband had an affair. We went to counseling for some months and on the whole are doing well. I found out a lot about the other women but feel a need to found out what she looks like.

Question #2:

My husband's affair has been over for 2 1/2 years now and we have successfully repaired our marriage to a level it never was before. I know lots about her except what she looks like. Why do I still have this strong desire to see her?

Question #3:

It has been just over a year since I found out about my husband's brief affair. We are back together and still attend counseling. I have a huge desire to see the woman he had the affair with although my counselor thinks I should let it go. Am I wrong to try and see who she is? I do not want to speak to her or even let her know who I am. I just want to see who she is.

Peggy's Response:

I continue to receive many questions about the third party (usually from the wife who wonders about the other woman, often specifically wondering what she looks like). The above three questions are recent examples. So even though I wrote about this particular issue about 3 years ago, I decided that since so many wives are still struggling with it, I needed to revisit it once more.

Many of the questions wives have about the other woman (like wanting to know what she looks like), seem to involve wondering whether they're wrong to want to know. In fact, it's not so much a matter of whether something is "right" or "wrong"—but whether it's "smart." By whether it's "smart," I mean whether it generally "works"—meaning whether it serves to move the process along in effectively coping with this experience.

In "wanting to see what the other woman looks like," the important consideration is why there is this desire. If it's simply out of general curiosity or to "fill in the gaps" by having a mental image instead of wondering/imagining, then it might be somewhat helpful. But if it's to compare yourself with her or to see what she had that made him willing to take the risk—then it's probably NOT helpful. (Frankly, if someone is completely honest with themselves, they will acknowledge that deep down they want to see how they compare.)

Basically, the reason these kinds of comparisons are not helpful is that the main attraction of anyone who is the other woman is not because of her appearance (or even other particular traits). It's just that she had the role of "other woman" (with all the newness, fantasy and freedom that goes with that role) while you have the role of "wife" (with the shared real-world responsibilities and ongoing nature of a long relationship).

Also, focusing so much on the third party gives them far more power than they deserve. Third parties are not "special" or "unique," they're simply "different" (primarily because of the different role), so there's no basis for comparing. In fact, it's extremely shortsighted to think that an affair only happened because of some lack in you or in the marriage.

Should I stay while there's still contact with third party?

Question:

I caught my fiancé cheating on me 6 weeks ago. Since then we have had many fights and I have found out she has still been lying and has not stopped seeing him. I know she does want to quit but is having a hard time. Everyone seems to agree that the first step to recovery is for the person having the affair to stop all ties with the third party. So should I attempt to have patience with her or just to kick her out lovingly and hope she makes the right choice to get rid of him so we can actually work things out and then hopefully come back to me eventually?

Peggy's Response:

This question raises an important question that has no simple "one-size-fits-all" response. While it's absolutely true that "severing all contact with the third party" is essential to rebuilding the primary relationship, this still leaves the question of what to do (or not do) until that contact is severed.

Although the basic dilemma is the same, the decision a person reaches (based on an analysis of the various factors and trade-offs) may be somewhat different when it's a fiancé (as in the above question) rather than a spouse, perhaps with children. So here are some considerations for everyone, regardless of marital status. (I'll use this letter as a guide to addressing some of the factors to be considered by each person.)

She has still been lying...

While it's difficult to decide what to do when contact continues, the fact that someone also lies about the continued contact makes it even more problematic. As difficult as it may be to deal with "the truth," it's far preferable (and actually shows more consideration, despite the pain caused by the truth) than lying about the continued contact. Also, honestly acknowledging the status of any contact is the first step toward potentially doing something to end it. (When it's kept hidden, it's easier to avoid doing anything productive about ending it.)

She does want to quit but is having a hard time.

If someone really wants to quit, they need to NOT lie but to ask their partner to help them quit. People are much more likely to act responsibly when they're "accountable" for their actions, but hiding the truth avoids this accountability and diminishes the chance of success in quitting. So a measure of just how much effort is being made to end contact is determined by what steps are taken to move toward ending contact. (Just waiting to magically feel like severing contact may mean waiting forever; it needs to be actively sought through actions that work in that direction. Words alone don't count.)

The first step to recovery is for the person...to stop all ties with third party...

Since nothing can be done to move forward until contact is severed, each person must make an individual determination as to how long they feel they can wait. One note about possibly waiting: A decision to "wait" should not mean waiting indefinitely—it needs to be a willingness to wait with some kind of understanding about parameters as to how long to try to be patient. Then this needs to be matched by the partner's willingness to demonstrate that they are actively working to sever contact.

Whether to have patience or to kick her out...

This decision needs to be based on as much rational analysis of the consequences of *both* alternatives as possible, *not* just determined by emotions. The reason this is important (albeit quite difficult) is that it's not just what decision is made, but *how* you make it that determines how you will feel about the consequences (whatever they may be). If you feel you made a thoughtful,

rational decision, you're likely to feel OK about it, whatever the result. But if you make an emotional decision (and it turns out badly), you're likely to second-guess yourself, wishing you had considered it more rationally.

Since either decision is likely to be frightening, in some ways it comes down to what I call a "worst first" decision. In other words, neither decision is without potential negative consequences, so you make your own decision based on avoiding the consequences that *you* personally would consider the "worst."

In the final analysis, there is risk in either decision, but clearly each situation needs to be individually assessed by the person in the middle of it—who, after all, knows their partner better than anyone else and is in a better position to determine which might be the most effective. Certainly, no one else can better make a calculated judgment as to which path is the most likely to have the desired result. And no one else has to live with the consequences of the decision—so you are the only person who can make it. But some of the above considerations may help in making the best decision for you personally.

Forgiving the third party?

Question:

How do I forgive the person my husband had his affair with? I've been told not to have contact with them, and they haven't asked for my forgiveness, yet I know it's something I must do for my own healing. I don't know how to go about it.

Peggy's Response:

There are really two important issues that arise from the above question. First, is the felt-need to "forgive" the third party—and the second issue is the whole question of having ANY contact with the third party. (The writer acknowledges having read that it's not wise to make contact.)

While any contact is problematic, it's especially troubling to think of making contact for the specific purpose of hoping the third party asks for forgiveness. There is no way to predict the reaction from the third party. But it's just as likely to make you feel worse as to make you feel better.

Below is an excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*:

[Wanting to talk to the third party] is much more likely to be the case with women than with men, since women have been trained to deal with interpersonal issues by talking through unresolved questions or feelings. Men, on the other hand, don't have this conditioning to verbally process their thoughts and feelings.

When a woman decides to seek out the other woman, she's obviously taking a chance on being hurt even more if the meeting goes badly. One woman who made contact with the other woman greatly regretted her decision. At first the other woman wouldn't accept her calls, but she persisted. Finally, she met with the other woman, but the meeting was nothing like she expected (or hoped for). The other woman was not the least bit embarrassed or guilty about the affair. She flaunted details of places they had gone and things they had done together. She chided the wife for being so naive and trusting, and said she felt sure she knew her husband better than his wife knew him. Not surprisingly, the wife felt even worse after this encounter, which only served to increase her feelings of anger and frustration.

(end of excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*)

Now, as for the whole idea of "forgiving" the third party...

Many people think (as the writer seems to indicate) that they must forgive the third party for their own healing. For many years, people have assumed that a failure to forgive any and all transgressions against us is harmful to our well-being—when, in fact, that is not the case. And I'm thankful to be able to report that there is now an excellent resource for understanding that there is an alternative to the felt-pressure to forgive in order to heal.

I highly recommend a book on forgiveness (which I have reviewed on my website):

How Can I forgive You? The Courage To Forgive, The Freedom Not To" by Janis Abrahms Spring. As I state in my review...

Here's some clear guidance in understanding and dealing with this complex issue. Rather than just saying 'You have to forgive to move on' or 'You don't have to forgive unless the other person is truly remorseful and tries to make up for what they have done'... we get a careful review of all the various aspects to be considered—as reflected in the subtitle, 'The Courage to Forgive, The Freedom Not To.'

One of the alternatives to forgiveness is "acceptance."

Here's an excerpt from the book with a little more about this:

Acceptance is a gutsy, life-affirming response to violation when the person who hurt you is unavailable or unrepentant... Your freedom lies not in protesting the unfairness of the violation or in getting the offender to care. Your freedom—perhaps your only freedom—is in deciding how to survive and transcend the injury. Don't underestimate this freedom: it's enormous. With it comes the power to decide how you're going to live the rest of your life. As you take the task of healing into your own hands, you empower yourself and make peace with the past.

There is much more in the book on this kind of acceptance, as well as other alternatives in dealing with forgiveness. And, as I said above, I recommend it to anyone struggling with this issue.

Regarding any issues related to the third party...

The bottom line (as I have written many times in the past) is that focusing on the third party serves to distract from the important effort of working toward rebuilding the marriage. It's much more effective to use all the available energy in focusing on the marriage, not on the third party. Also, the more time and energy spent focusing on the third party, the more power you are giving them. And the whole point is to diminish their power to affect your life in any way.

Most people have a hard time dealing with their feelings about the third party because they tend to think that an affair wouldn't have happened at all if it hadn't been for that particular person. But obsessing on any particular third party gives them far more importance than they deserve. The specific third party doesn't warrant our obsession with them because, in fact, they're not "special." Any number of people could have been the third party. The very nature of being the third party (instead of the spouse) means it's a fantasy relationship without the daily concerns and responsibilities required in making a life together in marriage.

Is it privacy or secrecy?

Question #1:

If one's husband had an affair, what do you think of emails and cell phones that the other party can contact the husband, without the wife knowing. Will this be an issue of privacy for the husband or just a secret from the wife?

Peggy's Response:

Sometimes a person will claim privacy rights in order to prevent their spouse from having relevant information. But a situation like the one above is not about privacy; it's about secrecy. Everyone deserves privacy, but demanding to be free to do things that increase the possibility that an affair will continue or resume is not about privacy. It's about secrecy—which is usually part of a tactic to hide irresponsible behavior.

Since people involved in affairs will use whatever they can find to deflect attention from their own actions, there is often an effort to find some way to "turn things around" and criticize the partner for something—in this case, for invading their privacy. If they invoke "privacy" rights, it's probably because they already have something to hide. So it's reasonable to be concerned—and to openly discuss those concerns without any feelings of guilt.

The test of whether something is "maintaining privacy" or "keeping secrets" 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 the relationship with the third party if they are to recover and rebuild the marriage. The very fact of maintaining contacts that are not shared with the spouse (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.

Since secrets are normally made only with someone with whom you are extremely close and have a trusting relationship... 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. So there is no right to "secrecy" in this kind of situation—because keeping something hidden or concealed from your partner just "adds insult to injury" in that any continuing "secrets" perpetuate the problem and the pain.

Finally, no one deserves to be in the position of constantly being fearful and anxious about the secret (not private) behavior of their spouse. It's not only reasonable, but appropriate to confront the behavior that is leading to such anxiety. And, as pointed out earlier, there is certainly no basis for feeling guilty about doing so.

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 on my website titled "Breaking the Code of Secrecy."

important note: the bigger issue is that there should be *no* continuing contact with the third party—regardless of whether or not the contact is kept secret. No effective effort can be made to recover from the affair and/or rebuild the marriage unless/until all contact has been severed.

Why don't they have to pay a price?

Question #1:

One thing that come up for me over and over, despite reading extensively on the subject, was that where does your anger towards the third party go? Everything you read tells you to focus on your relationship, and I understand that, but the feeling still lingers that the other party (and even your spouse) gets off pretty much scott free and you have all the pain. Any thoughts?

Question #2:

I am hesitant to even address the issue of the "other woman" because of the memory and pain. I have not seen the issue of accountability of the other woman addressed. It appears the other woman has never been held accountable for the part she played in this affair. She is a diagnosed sociopath, on and off meds. She works for an organization that has some very direct rules and codes of conduct regarding moral behavior 24/7. But still no accountability. Why?

Peggy's Response:

I used the above questions to illustrate the understandable sense of unfairness in being left to deal with all the pain—while others (both the spouse and third party) seem to get off easy, without paying a price.

The short answer to *why* this kind of thing happens is evident in the words of a book that makes it clear that "Life isn't fair." Even though the book has nothing to do with affairs, I highly recommend some reading that can help in dealing with these feelings of unfairness. It is *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* by Harold S. Kushner. This book is almost 25 years old, but still one of my all-time favorites. If you aren't already familiar with it, I hope you will read my Review of this book. (It is posted on my website under the section of Reviews titled: "Books about Life" and I also provide a link for ordering it from Amazon.com)

Another book I recommend (which also is unrelated to affairs) dealing with feelings of unfairness about life is: *The Road Less Traveled* by M. Scott Peck. The very first line in the book is: "Life is difficult." (I did not include a review of this one on my site, but it is a "classic," also written about 25 years ago, and is also available through Amazon.com)

Finally, here are some thoughts from some of my previous writings that are relevant to the situations described in this week's questions:

The emotions expressed above are quite understandable—especially when someone is in pain. However, when we have suffered some hurt or loss, no action against the other person is going to take away the hurt or restore the loss. In fact, the intensity of the desire for "justice" (revenge?) may serve to simply reinforce the pain, extending its power over our lives. Another reason to try to overcome the desire to cause harm to the other person is that "what we feed is what grows." So continuing to focus (obsess) on the third party tends to drain our energy and distract us from dealing with other important issues/people in our lives.

Sometimes we feel compelled to take some kind of action "on principle." But when that's the primary basis, it's usually triggered almost exclusively by emotion—without being balanced with thoughtful, rational considerations. In fact, it's often a self-destructive attitude, in essence being willing to "cut off my nose to spite my face."

Of course, if the third party's behavior is ongoing/continuing, then it's reasonable to take some kind of action to stop the behavior. (Or if it's unquestionably illegal, then appropriate legal action may be in order.) But when we continue to allow someone else to control our emotions (even after their hurtful behavior has ended), we are in essence letting them continue to have power over us.

So in considering how to "pay back" someone who has caused us pain... it's probably more useful to focus less on the other person and more on ourselves and our own lives—which is likely to be the best "justice" of all. After all, "living well is the best revenge."

To read (or re-read) more about this, see my Article permanently posted on the website about Revenge.

Why does he miss the affair partner?

Question:

After an 8-month Internet relationship, my husband of 33 years traveled 3000 miles to another country to meet her. They spent 3 days together. He came back and told me he wanted a divorce. I refused to give him one. We are in counseling together. Last night he told me at times he missed her, the relationship. He says she was very attentive and loving to him. She was also hoping he would marry her and bring her to this country. Are his residual feelings for her after an 8-month internet relationship normal? Is this cause for concern?

Peggy's Response:

Regarding the question as to whether his "residual feelings for her ... are normal," yes, it's normal to miss a relationship where "she was very attentive and loving to him."

However, regarding the question as to whether "*this is cause for concern...*"

Not if *both* the husband and wife recognize the very temporary nature of this kind of attention. His "missing her" reflects a sense of loss—but you can't lose what you never really had in the first place. Even though the pain of the loss may feel real, the relationship was based on a fantasy-type relationship, not based in reality. So the loss is of an illusion, not a reality.

One of the reasons I chose this question this week is because it reflects something I just read in a book review describing this kind of situation. Frankly, I never read fiction—since the factual stories I hear are often more dramatic than anything written as fiction. However, occasionally a piece of fiction writing contains some very relevant information about a topic—which is what happened in this case.

So I'll quote the excerpt that was printed in the book review I read of Terry McMillan's new book, *The Interruption of Everything*. (She's the author of a couple of popular books that were made into movies: *Waiting to Exhale* and *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*. In fact, she has been in the news lately because she's divorcing her young husband (who was a key part of the story in the second book) because she recently learned that he is gay.

Here is the excerpt Terry McMillan's new book: *The Interruption of Everything*.

(As I said, I haven't read the book, but this appears to be a scene where the main character's friend is musing about why the character's husband has left her for another woman. Also note that this describes a stereotypical discussion about men—whereas it's clear to me that the same kind of point could be made about women who leave a long-term marriage for another man.)

What's he gone and done? Wait, Let me guess: told you he's leaving because he's bored and now that the kids are all grown-up he realizes he's missed out on the most exciting time of his life because he got married so young and has been overburdened with the demands of it all and now here's his one chance to get it back and have some damn fun before he dies an old man and of course he has met some sweet young thang completely by accident because of course he had no intention of cheating on you but she was the one who put the radar out and came after him and he couldn't believe it when he didn't resist her advances but he was even more surprised when he had to repeat the s- - - over and over because boy, oh boy, she put no demands on him whatsoever, none, and she just appreciates him for who he is and what he does and she makes him feel interesting and smart and desirable and he'd forgotten what this felt like with you and hell, she makes him feel twenty-five again and even though he doesn't think this little interlude is anything serious or if it's going anywhere but all he knows is that he has to leave to see for himself, to fill in the blanks, and he's sorry for hurting you because of course he still loves you. Is that about right?

Frankly, no one should reasonably believe they are experiencing "the real thing" until after about a two-year period during which the infatuation (fantasy?) is being driven by the excitement of the newness of the connection. This time period is not arbitrary; it conforms to the scientifically-based information about romantic love that has been growing in recent years.

For the most comprehensive understanding of this concept, I highly recommend the most recent book by Helen Fisher, *Why we Love: The Nature and Chemistry of Romantic Love*.

Will it help the healing process to know who "she" is?

Question:

I have had an affair. My wife wants to know the ID of the other woman. I do not see how this will make our situation better. We are in counseling, reading books and I think we have made considerable progress. But my wife is on a mission when it comes to knowing who "she" is. I think it will not help in the healing process.

Peggy's Response:

As with any question asked by a person trying to heal from a spouse's affair, the healing process is helped by having the question answered. As I have repeatedly pointed out, it's not the information per se that makes such a difference in the ability to heal; rather, it's the willingness of the spouse to answer whatever questions are asked.

Frankly, the opinion of the person struggling to heal is the one that counts as far as what will or will not help them heal. The person who had an affair can't fully assess what is needed; they can only respect the needs as expressed by their mate. A failure to do so leads the struggling spouse to feel there's a lack of caring about their pain. And in this particular instance, failing to reveal the third party (after repeated requests) feels like "protecting" the third party at the spouse's expense.

One of the reasons it's so important to answer questions (regardless of whether the question is about the identity of the third party) is that it brings a little bit of balance back into the relationship. The secrecy and deception involved in having an affair have the effect of putting the spouse in a "one-down" position—where they don't feel like an equal partner in the relationship. And refusing to answer questions about the affair serves to simply add "insult to injury." The spouse deserves to be treated as an equal by respecting their "need to know."

Also, statistical evidence of the correlation between "answering questions" and healing/recovery from a partner's affair can be found in the results I have posted from my Research Questionnaire. See my website (under the "Therapists" section) to read an overview of the results of my survey.

One final important point: there's no way to escape the pain and difficulty in dealing with an affair. So while knowing the identity of the third party may be painful, people have consistently reported that "nothing is worse than not knowing." So there will be pain either way, but eventual recovery is much more likely when answers are given to any questions that are asked. As mentioned above, it's the willingness to answer (more than the answers themselves) that makes a significant difference in the healing process.

How can I stay knowing he still has "feelings" for his lover?

Question:

What if my husband says he loves me and wants to stay together to make the marriage work but that he still has "feelings" for his lover. He has said they will subside in time but that they are still there. I am struggling with this and also that he feels in love with this woman, it was not solely the physical aspect but a true love. I am not sure I can stay with him knowing this.

Peggy's Response:

"True love"??? Unfortunately, people tend to think of love as the exciting, heady feelings of new love or falling in love. It's important to recognize that this initial feeling of euphoria is NOT "true love."

Having "feelings" for a lover has far more to do with hormones than with love ("true" or any other kind). This first stage of love never lasts. It's simply the first heady stage of love—a stage based on "chemistry" that generally recedes after about two years.

In fact, these feelings are typical of the initial stage of any romantic relationship—whether at the start of a relationship between single people (who may eventually marry) or between people involved in an affair. But love simply begins that way. Over time it changes. It's important to understand this "changing nature of love."

Once you understand the various stages of love—you no longer assume that love just means that first flush of in love feelings. In fact, the love in an affair is much more a fantasy than a reality. 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 "true love;" it was just "new."

But in the meantime, it can help the spouse (like the writer of this question) who may feel threatened by this "true love" to remember that it's only a stage that doesn't last. There's really no comparison between the loving "feelings" that sometimes happen in an affair with the lasting *love* in a long-term relationship. It's a little like comparing apples and oranges.

So in deciding whether or not to stay with a spouse who has had an affair, there are many more important factors/considerations than whatever "feelings" might be involved. The feelings are not founded on substance and reality and are not time-tested—so they aren't as meaningful as everyone involved might consider them to be.

Severing contact with the third party?

Question #1:

It has been almost a year since I discovered a three year affair with a neighbor and family friend. While we make progress, it is constantly derailed by my wife continuing to keep some connection to him—including continuing to see his wife, who has no idea what happened. It seems terribly dishonest to me and prevents me from fully trusting in my wife again.

Question #2:

Six months ago I confronted my husband about an affair with someone he met online. He agreed that the communication would stop and I recently discovered that he's still contacting her. I've expressed to him that if he fans the flames, the fire will grow and that his actions are a major setback for our marriage. He says he doesn't want to lose his family, but if he continues to contact her, I'll take that as him willing to risk it all. What's the best way to handle this?

Question #3:

My husband had an affair 3 years ago. The woman, who was a work colleague, also lives in our town. My husband and I have worked through a lot and are in a good place. The woman approached me the other day in the grocery store and wants to have coffee! She wanted to apologize, we have mutual friends, unhappy with the discomfort level of running into me. Wants to feel comfortable when I'm out with mutual friends to come over to say hi. What is this really about? I've been taught forgiveness but...

Peggy's Response:

Severing contact with the third party is one of the most critical steps in rebuilding the marriage. Until that connection is broken, it's unlikely that a couple can begin to heal the wounds from the affair. Frankly, there can be no progress (or really even beginning the process of working on the marriage) until all contact with the third party is severed.

As I have repeatedly pointed out, continuing to have any kind of contact with the third party serves to inflame the already raw emotions. Ongoing contact feels like "adding insult to injury," leading to continuing the pain of the initial discovery. So severing contact is a critical determinant of the degree to which the emotions can subside.

As I have also written in many previous Responses, there is one major exception to the rule about severing contact with the third party: when there is a child from the affair. At that point, the needs of the innocent child take precedence over severing contact. (For more on this, see the article posted on the website titled: When there is a child from an affair.) There are also rare occurrences (when the spouse and third party had been close friends prior to the affair or if they are related) where they have been able to remain in touch and "friendly."

The first two letters reflect the typical problem of a spouse being reluctant to sever contact. (And I'll discuss that at length below.) But sometimes, as letter #3 illustrates, the third party can be pushing to maintain contact. In that situation it's best to make one clear statement that there is to be no contact, then stick to it.

This might involve saying that you don't want to be put in a position of being rude, but you do not want to pretend a friendliness that you do not feel. So it's best for all concerned to simply "keep your distance." And if the other person is "unhappy with the discomfort level," then this is just a natural consequence of what has happened—not something that warrants your helping to alleviate. (Also, I hope/assume the description of the third party as being someone who was a work colleague means they no longer work together. It's extremely critical to sever that kind of daily association.)

Overwhelmingly, the best way to handle any/all contact with the third party is to completely sever it. When the third party continues to be in the same geographical area and unable to avoid at least "seeing" them, people sometimes take more drastic measures to sever contact, including moving to a different neighborhood or town.

But back to the typical problem of the spouse who says they don't want to lose their family (while continuing to see or talk to the third party)... This is using empty words at a time when only action has meaning. Of course, some people can and do stay married without severing the outside contact—but it puts a terrible strain on the marriage, leaving it to further deteriorate rather than being rebuilt.

It's important to be clear that there is a big difference between simply "staying married" (in what is likely to be a deadened or meaningless marriage) and actually "rebuilding the marriage" (which is what any reasonable person would prefer)—and that difference is largely determined by whether or not all contact with the third party is severed.

Also, the affair has significantly undermined (if not completely destroyed) any trust. And there is no realistic chance to begin rebuilding trust until contact is severed. Restoring trust depends on some specific actions—which are spelled out more completely in the following pages permanently posted on the site. Specifically note the significance of "severing contact with the third party" as described in the articles posted on the website titled:

“How can you ever rebuild trust after an affair?”

“Steps to restoring trust.”

Should I tell the other woman's husband?

Question:

I learned of my husband's year-long affair six months ago, 2 years after the sex had ended but while the two were still in frequent contact. Since then we've gone to counseling, talked a lot and tried to rebuild our marriage. The other woman knows I know. She has not told her husband about her involvement with my husband. Should I tell him? I would want him to tell me if the situation were reversed.

Peggy's Response:

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. (This give them a better chance of recovering—whether or not the marriage ends.) So 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.

What about contacting the third party's spouse?

Question#1:

I am thinking about contacting the third party's husband (soon to be ex). He knows about the office affair my spouse had with his. I want to share my side of the story, in hopes he would share his. I feel we both have a right to see the full picture. However I am worried this may cause more trouble... What do you think?

Question#2:

Should I tell my married lover's wife of our affair?

Question#3:

My husband had a 6-year affair with a woman from his office. When I found out I contacted her and she begged me not to tell her husband, claiming that he had a crazy personality and he might kill her and my husband. She has met my demands, no contact and she has left the job, but 5 months later I have regrets about not telling him. Should I have told him? Would it be immoral to tell now after she met my demands?

Peggy's Response:

This is an issue that comes up quite often, and I've addressed it a number of times in the past. But the above questions provide an opportunity to make the broader point about the importance of having "No contact with the third party's spouse"—regardless of whether or not they know about the affair.

Some people have an understandably strong desire to confront or clarify the whole situation with the third party's spouse. And while this kind of effort may seem like a good idea, it's almost always based on rationalization as to the likely results of taking any such action—rather than clear, rational thinking.

Also, (as the first question rightfully recognizes) "this may cause more trouble." In fact, it's likely to result in raising more new issues than resolving old ones. But more important, it just "stirs the pot"—keeping the whole drama going (and even growing)! In this situation (as with many situations), "what you feed is what grows."

The bottom line is that pursuing some kind of contact or closure with the third party's spouse normally feeds the agitation you feel inside. And you're not likely to feel the kind of "satisfaction" you're hoping for. In fact, it's likely to make things worse rather than better.

But perhaps the most critical reason not to pursue this kind of contact is that it uses the energy and focus that would be better directed at dealing with your own situation—and distracts you from getting about the business of either dealing with your own spouse or getting on with your life.

Finally, specifically regarding the final question:

"Would it be immoral to tell now after she met my demands?"

I don't normally focus on "morality" in helping people deal with affairs, believing it is more helpful to use a more "rational" approach... however, I do believe that in addition to the rational reasons for not telling the spouse, there is also an ethical basis for not telling as well.

WHEN THERE'S A CHILD FROM THE AFFAIR

What if there's a child from the affair?

Question:

Dealing with my husband's affair is hard enough. But I have the added problem of trying to cope with the fact that my husband also had a child with the other woman. I just don't know what to do.

Peggy's Response:

When we think of "the children" in relation to an affair, we're usually thinking of our own children. However, there are times when children (or a child) result from an affair. While in most instances, it's important to sever all contact with the third party, everything is different when a child is involved. Most people (no matter how much they're hurting) don't want to hurt an innocent child, so situations like this obviously call for different kinds of thinking and behavior.

During the past 15 years I've heard from a number of people dealing with the issue of children resulting from an affair, and they've handled it in a number of different ways. For most, the attitude was to try to deal with the third party and child similar to the way they would deal with an ex and a child from a former marriage. For some, they were unable to accommodate this situation and tried to "force" a choice. For some wives, the child was the "last straw" (so to speak) and they were unable to find a way to resolve the issues surrounding the child, so decided to end the marriage. But on the other end of the spectrum, one woman even took her husband's and the "other woman's" child to raise—after the other woman didn't want the child once she didn't get the husband.

Clearly, when children are involved, there are no clear/easy answers—and nothing about this whole ordeal is black and white or written in stone. Since any "solution" is difficult because it's so complicated, each person who faces this dilemma needs to make their own decision based on all the factors involved in their particular situation. Since they are the ones who must live with the consequences of the decision, no one else can tell them what to do.

When an affair results in pregnancy?

(People tend to think that it's rare for an affair to result in pregnancy; however, it happens more often than you might think. I continue to receive many questions about this situation, and below are 9 of the recent questions I've received about children resulting from an affair.)

Question #1:

My husband and I separated for one year. In that time a girl he was seeing off and on purposely got pregnant. My husband and I are back together now and already share 2 kids of our own. I don't feel it necessary for him to spend any time alone with the mother (the other woman) and his new daughter. However, I am OK with him seeing the new baby with myself there. He at this point really wants nothing to do with either, besides the child support.

Question #2:

My wife of eight years became pregnant by someone else and gave birth. She wants to come back home to me. Suggestions?

Question #3:

Two years ago my primary physician placed me on medication to help with anxiety & depression after my second son. I became manic on the medication - something that I was failed to be told is a side effect of this particular drug. Anyway, in my manic state an affair ensued and I became pregnant. I cannot begin to tell you how out of character for me. The ob/gyn told me to get off the medication; I did and became sane. My husband adopted the child, but his family won't. We are together after a lot of therapy, but he won't stand up to them.

Question #4:

I am the third party in an affair and have become pregnant. What is your advice as to explaining this to my child?

Question #5:

How can I forget and move on? My husband had an affair for a year and a half and consequently got this woman pregnant. We have been trying to work it out since August, but this woman does not accept the fact he chose to stay with his wife and just fathered the child. It's hard enough to move on when in my heart all I can keep thinking about is how I don't feel superior to any other woman now since we have two children and now he has one out of the marriage. My heart is destroyed; all I do is think.

Question #6:

Have been in affair over a year. Got pregnant. Married Man is very mad. Says he will take care of the baby financially, but nothing more. Is this very common? Married Man has said marriage was bad, all of a sudden they had a long talk, marriage is great. I don't believe she knows of the affair for sure, and I don't believe she knows of the pregnancy. She controls all the money so I don't know what to do about this situation. Is this common?

Question #7:

What is the reality of fixing a marriage when your husband has got the other woman pregnant? How do you deal with a child from an affair when you can't deal with the other woman? When moving on after an affair, it is crucial to sever all ties with the other person, but what if your husband gets the other woman pregnant and is obligated to be a part of that child's life?

Question #8:

Having just found out after a long happy marriage, that during our engagement he had a affair that resulted in a child born 6 weeks before our marriage. I waffle between acceptance and sheer agony. We have had a very good marriage, but I am now filled with feelings of such anger and doubt, that I find it hard to believe in us.

Question #9:

(From a 30-year-old child of an affair):

I am the result of infidelity. My then-single mother had an affair with a married man which lasted for over 3 years and resulted in my birth 30 years ago. I have never met my father or his other children, although I would like to, because he is still married to the same woman. I doubt that I am alone but I haven't yet found others with similar circumstances to share with. I would like to connect with someone who has been through this. Any ideas?

Peggy's Response:

One of the first points I want to draw attention to is the fact that the above letters represent a range of situations. Six of them are instances where a married man had an affair and the other woman got pregnant. One is from a married man whose wife had an affair and got pregnant. One is from a married woman who had an affair and got pregnant. And the final one is from an adult child resulting from an affair.

When an innocent child is involved, it affects all the typical perspectives on affairs and how to recover/rebuild, etc. (For instance, Question #7 reflects the reality that it's not reasonable to think in terms "severing contact" when there is a child from the affair.) So while an affair that does *not* include a pregnancy is difficult enough, a child from the affair is a quantum leap in degree of difficulty. (Question #6 illustrates one of the many difficulties affecting everyone—how to deal with the inevitable questions of financial support for the child.)

So the first step in thinking about this whole situation is to recognize that (as the letters clearly illustrate), the issues related to a pregnancy from an affair are of a long-lasting nature. So it's unreasonable to think in terms of any quick solutions to these situations. In fact, for most people, it's a day-by-day process of coming to terms with what has happened—regardless of how they decide to handle it. (Question #5 asked "how can I forget and move on?" Frankly, "moving on" is a very gradual process that does *not* involve "forgetting"—which is impossible. The goal is to be able to "remember," but *not* with the same kind of pain, and this takes lots of time and effort at thinking clearly.)

That's not to say that people can't (and don't) deal with this challenge effectively. In fact, it's fairly remarkable how this can bring out the best in some people—who strive to rise above their own pain to try to do the best for everyone involved. I've written about this in the past, so here's a quick overview of some of the ways people have handled this kind of situation:

When it's the wife who has an affair and gets pregnant...if the couple is to stay married, there is an inevitable acceptance of the child into the family. And concern for the well-being of the child often becomes the "glue" that holds the couple together in their effort to recover and rebuild. (Question #2 shows how difficult this decision can be for the husband, but as mentioned above, it can be done. And Question #3 shows how the "extended family" can be a stumbling block, requiring that the couple really stand together.)

If it's the husband who has a child from an affair, there are many more possible options of what may happen. I've heard from people who have dealt with this issue in a number of different ways. For most, the attitude was to try to deal with the third party and child similar to the way they would deal with an ex and a child from a former marriage. For some, they were unable to accommodate this situation and tried to "force" a choice. For some wives, the child was the "last straw" (so to

speak) and they were unable to find a way to resolve the issues surrounding the child, so decided to end the marriage. But on the other end of the spectrum, one husband and wife even took the child from the affair to raise (after the other woman didn't want the child once she didn't get the husband).

Some of these different ways of handling the situation are exemplified in the above questions. For instance, the wife who wrote Question #1 above illustrates some pretty clear thinking at this very early stage. And the third party in Question #4 shows real thoughtfulness in wondering how to explain this to the child. In general, age-appropriate honesty is best—since the child is likely to eventually learn the truth anyway. Speaking of eventually learning the truth, Question #8 illustrates how the birth of a child from an affair may only be revealed many years later, still causing pain and difficulty. So "responsible honesty" is almost always the better course.

A word about the final question from the "30-year-old child of an affair..."

I wish I knew how to help people in this situation connect with each other. But that need would be lessened if adults who are dealing with a pregnancy from an affair work very hard to filter their decisions/actions through the eyes of the baby who will someday grow up and *still* be dealing with this situation—even if the adults avoided dealing with it at the time. For most of us, it's not the mistakes we make that define us (although no child is ever a "mistake"), it's the way we step up and address the problem that determines our integrity as a person. So it does not serve anyone well to pretend the baby doesn't exist. Once there is a pregnancy from an affair, there a new reality that needs to be dealt with as responsibly as possible by all concerned.

However, since individual values and priorities differ widely, no one can really "advise" another person as to *precisely* how they should handle this situation. Each person needs to make their own assessment of which trade-offs they can best live with (knowing that it *will* involve trade-offs) since there is no path that does not involve some kind of sacrifice.

If ever there were a situation for which there is no ideal solution, this is it. It may help to realize that with really complex situations like this there are no clear/easy answers—and nothing about this whole ordeal is black and white or written in stone. Since any "solution" is difficult because it's so complicated, each person who faces this dilemma needs to make their own decision based on all the factors involved in their particular situation. And since they are the ones who must live with the consequences of the decision, no one else can tell them what to do.

There will be better times and worse times; but at any given moment, we do well to simply do the best we can at that time, knowing that things may be better/easier at some point in the future. The bottom line is to realize that there is no simple advice as to how to handle it; it's an ongoing process of continuing to think as clearly as possible about all the complicated factors.

What about his guilt over the child?

Question:

The other woman went after my husband and purposely got pregnant. After some time I was able to truly forgive him, but he cannot seem to forgive himself and this is preventing us from fully repairing. When the guilt is so severe, does it ever end? Truly my life is not the same and never will be!

Peggy's Response:

As for "dealing with the guilt" and the fact that "life will never be the same"—these are the realities and challenges of any life crisis—like accidentally killing someone else in an automobile accident. When we're faced with consequences of our actions that can not be erased or undone, it calls for digging deep inside and discovering some way to become better people by virtue of this experience.

So the first step is letting go of "in only..." and looking toward "what can I do to demonstrate that I've learned an important lesson" from this experience. And, further, how can I take this learning and use it to help others. The answers to those questions will be personal and individual, but it's worth the effort. No matter how difficult something is to deal with, there's always the potential for learning from it; and using these learnings to forge a more responsible and more fulfilling life can be of great help in counteracting the feelings of guilt or regret.

How can I deal with a child from the affair?

Question:

My husband just informed me of his 3-year affair that produced a child, now 1 year old. He wants to tell our two kids, ages 8 and 4, of his mistake and the child's existence, and wishes to incorporate this child into our life somehow, beyond paying child support payments. I do not want anything to do with her, nor do I feel I want to tell the children at this point in time. What do you recommend in terms of telling the children? I feel I cannot handle it.

Peggy's Response:

This is probably the most difficult of all the potential consequences from an affair—and it happens far more often than most people realize. An innocent child deserves every possible consideration from all the adults. Ironically, providing this consideration can, as in the above letter, present serious problems for the children from the marriage.

Among those people I know about who have dealt with the issue of children resulting from an affair, they have handled it in a number of different ways. As I've written in the past, some people "forced" a choice, some ended the marriage, and some dealt with the third party and child similar to the way they would deal with an ex and a child from a former marriage—even bringing the child into the home for visits. Since any "solution" is difficult because it's so complicated, each person who faces this dilemma needs to make their own decision based on all the factors involved in their particular situation.

As for the specific issue mentioned in this particular question (regarding telling the children in the marriage), there are no clear answers, only some things to consider. For instance, in this particular situation, I noted that she said she did not want to tell the children "at this point in time." (She also indicated in the beginning of the letter that her husband had "just informed" her about the affair and the child.)

It's perfectly understandable that someone in this position does not feel capable of telling the children "at this point." She's still trying to absorb the sheer shock of the situation. It usually takes about 3 months for someone like this to simply get to the point of being able to eat, sleep, and function normally—even when there is not the additional issue of a child from the affair. So it's normal to "feel I cannot handle it" at this point. However, just because she doesn't feel like telling the children at this point, that's not to say that she won't be able to handle it at a later time. After about a year, it gets somewhat easier to rationally (rather than emotionally) react to what needs to be done regarding what has certainly been a devastating experience.

One reason that in general it's better to tell the children "at some point" is that they will almost certainly someday learn of it some other way. And finding out from someone else would not only mean they had to deal with the facts of the situation, but would have to deal with the additional pain of not having heard it from their parents. (It's also important that any telling be done by both parents together.) As for timing, it's up to each family to make these kinds of decisions, but at ages 8 and 4, they're likely to accept it easier than when they are older and have more understanding of "affairs" and of the long-term significance of what has happened.

How can I live with his having a child from his affair?

Question:

My husband had a "one night stand" he calls it, with a "friend" he has had for a few years. He told me about the affair because she is now pregnant and wants to keep the baby. I am having trouble believing his one night stand story. He says he is sorry and wants to work it out with me, but I don't know how I can live with the fact he will have another child. We have a three year old daughter and have been married six years. Please help.

Peggy's Response:

This question involves two issues: one, whether the husband is being truthful about the "one night stand" and the other, far more difficult issue of dealing with the fact that he will have a child from the affair. Since dealing with the issue of a child is so critical, I'll focus on that. (But regarding the "one-night stand" question, it's unlikely but not impossible.)

A child results from an affair far more often than most people realize—or than anyone likes to admit. While the above situation (and my response) focus on the married man having a child from an affair, in fact, sometimes when it's a married woman involved in an affair who gets pregnant, the fact that a child resulted from the affair is never known if the affair is not discovered.

Of all the particular situations related to affairs, having a child result from the affair is surely one of the more difficult, so having mixed feelings about the situation is almost inevitable. There is no simple advice and there are no easy answers as to how to handle it; it's an ongoing process of continuing to think as clearly as possible about all the complicated factors.

I've seen this kind of situation develop in many different ways.

Here are some of the various scenarios:

- the other woman says she's pregnant, but isn't; it's just a ploy
- the other woman does have the child and wants ongoing contact with the man
- the other woman has the child and only wants financial support from the man
- the other woman has the child but wants no contact/support from the man

As for what a couple decides to do: when there is continuing contact, this is likely to create an ongoing issue for the rest of their lives. Some couples who stay married try to maintain as much separateness from the child as possible, perhaps fighting legally to avoid involvement. Other couples who stay married actually participate in the parenting of the child, feeling that the child is innocent and deserves to know both parents.

The impact on the marriage seems to relate not so much to which path is chosen as to whether or not both the husband and wife agree on the path. As with most ordeals in life, if they pull together to face it and deal with it in a united way, they can actually strengthen their bond. But if they are in disagreement as to how to handle it, it's likely to pull them apart.

In the very early stages of contemplating this situation, most people don't know precisely how they're going to feel until the baby is born. So until that time, there's usually not a great deal that can be done as far as getting real clarity about how to proceed in the future. There's a natural sense of urgency to get this settled, but a hasty decision as to how it will be handled may or may not still be relevant as more time passes, more aspects are considered, and the full reality of the situation sets in. So patience, thoughtful consideration of all aspects, and ongoing honest communication about the whole situation is probably the most reasonable course to follow.

Most people (no matter how much they're hurting) don't want to hurt an innocent child. So this situation obviously calls for different kinds of thinking and behavior. The main thing to keep in mind is that there are no clear/easy answers, and nothing about this whole ordeal is black and white

or written in stone. It may be tempting to feel that there should be some good way of resolving this kind of situation. But if ever there were a situation for which there is no ideal solution, this is it.

It may help to realize that with really complex situations like this, there is probably no way to have everything work out best for everybody. So anyone dealing with this issue need not depend on finding a reliable outside source for guidance in how to handle it. Rather, they can be as conscientious as possible in finding their own way.

What if the affair produces a child?

Since I receive a steady stream of questions regarding a child resulting from an affair, I periodically focus on this issue. Here are some typical questions and some comments about this special issue.

Question # 1

My spouse cheated on me and got the woman pregnant. He wants to be a part of the child's life but not the woman and he wants to stay with me. Should I take the role of being a stepmom?

Question # 2

It has been 2 years since my husband's affair. This is his second time with the same woman; the first time was 23 years ago, it lasted 8 years. They have a 14 year old daughter, whom I have never met and my husband has only seen 6-8 times in her life. I feel the only reason my husband is here with me is because he has too much to lose: money, home, retirement, etc. I feel he loves himself the most. We have 2 sons, 24 & 16. How would you ever recover from a situation like this?

Question # 3

My husband had an affair that lasted 9 months. She is was a co-worker, 19 years old and is pregnant with his child. We are in counseling and trying to work out our marriage. How many affairs result in a pregnancy? Is it foolish to believe that things will be ok since they will have a child together?

Question # 4

My husband had a 5-year affair in which he fathered a child. We are now trying to rebuild our marriage, but we're dealing with the other woman as the mother of his child on a daily basis and she keeps trying to woo him back. Any suggestions to help keep this from creating problems between us?

Question # 5

My husband and I have been married for six years and have a son together that is four years old. We have been together for the past ten years. Recently my husband confessed to having an affair. I of course am devastated, but we also agreed to work through this and stay together and are getting guidance through counselors and our church. The problem is the third-party is pregnant. How do we distance ourselves from the third-party without abandoning my husband's baby?

Peggy's Response:

Although I don't know of any statistics that reflect exactly how often this situation happens, it's more often than anyone likes to admit.

What to do?

During the past 20 years I've heard from a number of people dealing with the issue of children resulting from an affair, and they've handled it in a number of different ways.

--For most, the attitude was to try to deal with the third party and child similar to the way they would deal with an ex and a child from a former marriage.

--For some, they were unable to accommodate this situation and tried to "force" a choice. For some wives, the child was the "last straw" (so to speak) and they were unable to find a way to resolve the issues surrounding the child, so decided to end the marriage.

--On the other end of the spectrum, one woman even took her husband's and the "other woman's" child to raise—after the other woman didn't want the child once she didn't get the husband.

If ever there were a situation for which there is no ideal solution, this is it. It may help to realize that with really complex situations like this there are no clear/easy answers—and nothing about this whole ordeal is black and white or written in stone. Since any "solution" is difficult because it's so complicated, each person who faces this dilemma needs to make their own decision based on all the factors involved in their particular situation. And since they are the ones who must live with the consequences of the decision, no one else can tell them what to do.

There will be better times and worse times; but at any given moment, we do well to simply do the best we can at that time, knowing that things may be better/easier at some point in the future. The bottom line is to realize that there is no simple advice as to how to handle it; it's an ongoing process of continuing to think as clearly as possible about all the complicated factors.

When it's the wife who has a child from an affair:

While all the above questions relate to a child resulting from the husband's affair, it sometimes happens that a child results from a wife's affair. This is a very complicated situation—regardless of whether it's the husband or the wife who has a child from an affair. But in situations like those described above (where it's the husband who has a child from an affair), there are many more possible options of what may happen.

However, when it's the wife, there are several major differences. First, it's possible that the husband never knows of the affair and never knows this child is not his. And if he does know about the affair, there are two likely scenarios: they either get a divorce—or there is an acceptance of the child into the family (which, again, happens more often than people think). Of course (while much less likely), if the male third party knows of the child and wants some role in the child's life, that's another very complicating situation, somewhat more like the situation where it's the husband in an affair who has a child.

Recovering:

While in most instances, an important part of recovering is severing all contact with the third party, this may not be possible or preferable when a child is involved. The child, of course, is an innocent party in this whole experience; however, since their presence serves as an ongoing reminder of the affair, this can understandably make it more difficult to recover.

One thing that can help the recovery process is keeping in mind the innocence of the child and focusing on what's "best for the child"—which can sometimes lift people out of a very narrow focus only on their own personal pain. Also, perhaps surprisingly, concern for the well-being of the child often becomes the "glue" that holds the couple together in their effort to recover and rebuild. This effort by both the husband and the wife in trying to deal with this enormous challenge can serve to draw them together.

In fact, the most critical element in the recovery may be the degree to which the husband and wife can make a joint effort to face this challenge together and shift their focus to the future rather than dwelling on the past. This doesn't mean ignoring or denying the reality of what has happened. It just means following the guidelines that are generally helpful in recovery from affairs when there is not the additional issue of a child from the affair.

What about the other children?

I also receive questions like the following—which appears to be written by someone involved in an affair that produces a child: "What if the affair produces a child? The cheating spouses are in love but have other children and they want to do what's best for all involved.

Realistically, there is no way to do something that is "best for all involved" in that everyone loses and is negatively impacted by this situation. However, since the "other children" are likely to be impacted, it's wise to discuss and plan for when and how to tell them about this "new" child.

First of all, it's very difficult to feel capable of telling the other children while still trying to absorb the sheer shock of the situation. But it's essential to move as quickly as possible toward being able to talk to the children. One reason this is so important is that the children will almost certainly someday learn of it some other way. And finding out from someone else would not only mean they had to deal with the facts of the situation, but would have to deal with the additional pain of not having heard it from their parents. It's also important that the telling be done by both parents together—primarily in order to set an example that everyone is in this together and that it is something that can be dealt with if everyone is committed to doing their best (whatever that may be on an individual basis).

Legal Questions:

Finally, I also receive "legal" questions that are beyond the scope of this forum. For instance: "Can a woman have an affair with another man and then get pregnant with the other man's child and still get full custody before the father would?" This is simply a further illustration of the enormous complexity in dealing with situations involving a child that results from an affair.

What about a child from an affair?

Question:

What recommendations do you have to recover from an affair when it has resulted in a child?

Peggy's Response:

(This is an issue about which I receive a steady stream of letters and have addressed in the past, but I'll share some comments again.)

First, this situation happens more often than anyone likes to admit. The child, of course, is an innocent party in this whole experience; however, since their presence serves as an ongoing reminder of the affair, this can understandably make it more difficult to recover. Actually, trying to expand the considerations to include thinking of what's "best for the child" can sometimes lift people out of a very narrow focus only on their own personal pain. Also, a joint effort by the husband and wife in trying to deal with this enormous challenge can serve to draw them together.

This is a very complicated situation (regardless of whether it's the husband or the wife who has a child from an affair). However, when it's the wife, there is an inevitable acceptance of the child into the family if the couple stay married (which, again, happens more often than people think). And concern for the well-being of the child often becomes the "glue" that holds the couple together in their effort to recover and rebuild.

If it's the husband who has a child from an affair, there are many more possible options of what may happen. I've heard from people who have dealt with this issue in a number of different ways. For most, the attitude was to try to deal with the third party and child similar to the way they would deal with an ex and a child from a former marriage. For some, they were unable to accommodate this situation and tried to "force" a choice. For some wives, the child was the "last straw" (so to speak) and they were unable to find a way to resolve the issues surrounding the child, so decided to end the marriage. But on the other end of the spectrum, one husband and wife even took the child from the affair to raise (after the other woman didn't want the child once she didn't get the husband).

If ever there were a situation for which there is no ideal solution, this is it. It may help to realize that with really complex situations like this there are no clear/easy answers—and nothing about this whole ordeal is black and white or written in stone. Since any "solution" is difficult because it's so complicated, each person who faces this dilemma needs to make their own decision based on all the factors involved in their particular situation. And since they are the ones who must live with the consequences of the decision, no one else can tell them what to do.

There will be better times and worse times; but at any given moment, we do well to simply do the best we can at that time, knowing that things may be better/easier at some point in the future. The bottom line is to realize that there is no simple advice as to how to handle it; it's an ongoing process of continuing to think as clearly as possible about all the complicated factors.

And there's certainly no simple advice as to how to recover; however, the most critical element in the recovery may be the degree to which the husband and wife can make a joint effort to face this challenge together and shift their focus to the future rather than dwelling on the past. This doesn't mean ignoring or denying the reality of what has happened. It just means following the guidelines that are generally helpful in recovery.

What happens when there's a child from an affair?

Before responding, I'm printing two letters that both came in within the same week—amazingly addressing a similar issue from both sides. One refers to a newborn baby from an affair and the other is from a 35-year-old who was once such a baby.

Question #1:

My wife had an affair a year ago. She became pregnant. We already had 2 children together, and now have a baby girl. Could you address general issues about this scenario (like dealing with the other party, family, and the children)?

Question #2:

When I was 35, my dad talked me into a blood test. I found out I was a child of an affair. Is it better not to know? When should a parent confess, if ever, to their spouse and children? What is the best way to rebuild the trust with my mother?

Peggy's Response:

Many people try to keep secret as much information as possible when a child results from an affair. However, as is clear from the letter from the 35-year-old who learned about being a child of an affair, it's generally better to tell sooner rather than later.

These kinds of significant life events have a way of coming out (to everyone) at some point, so it's preferable to have control over when (and more important, how) the information is shared with other key people. As for ways of "dealing with the other party, family, and the children," each is somewhat different. But in every instance there needs to be as much openness and honesty as possible.

Naturally, it's important to be age-appropriate in what and how the information is shared with other young children. But even children can be given information that parents might otherwise wish not to share with them by simply acknowledging that parents also sometimes make mistakes. (Of course, it's important to clarify that this does not mean the baby is a mistake, only that this is a somewhat different way for the baby to come into the family; but that everybody loves the baby.)

Since this kind of situation often creates even more emotions than a situation where an affair does *not* involve a child, it's all the more important that everything be done in a way that maintains a focus on "what's best for the innocent child" in all this. In fact, as I've written before, sometimes this focus can lift people out of a very narrow focus only on their own personal difficulty in dealing with this situation.

A life crisis like this calls for developing and/or finding within yourself all the strength and resolve you can muster to face this situation with as much integrity as possible. While there may be no pride in being in this situation in the first place, there can be a great deal of pride in handling it well.

By understanding how difficult it is to "do the right thing" in such trying times, someone in the position of the 35-year-old who learned they were the child of an affair can draw on that awareness in "rebuilding the trust with my mother." In cases such as this, the time of crisis came later, but it's still appropriate to approach the whole situation with as much integrity as possible—remembering, as mentioned above, that even parents make mistakes.

Finally, it's helpful for everyone (whether it's when the situation is fresh or whether it's years later when it finally comes to light) to display the kind of thoughtfulness that is obvious in *both* of the above letters. Having the right attitude (one of wanting to handle all this in the best way possible) is

more important than having the right "words." So simply being willing to take responsibility for addressing this issue (rather than hiding it or wishing it away or blaming, etc.) is the best direction. And, of course, it will be important to implore everyone involved (for the well-being of the child) to "pull together" in trying to deal with this challenge in a responsible way.

What happens when a child is conceived from an affair?

Question:

What happens when a child is conceived from an affair?

(This is such a prevalent question that I have also added this particular response to the website under the Articles about Affairs. See the article titled "When there is a child from an affair.")

Peggy's Response:

First, this situation happens more often than anyone likes to admit. The child, of course, is an innocent party in this whole experience; however, since their presence serves as an ongoing reminder of the affair, this can understandably make it more difficult to recover. Actually, trying to expand the considerations to include thinking of what's "best for the child" can sometimes lift people out of a very narrow focus only on their own personal pain. Also, a joint effort by the husband and wife in trying to deal with this enormous challenge can serve to draw them together.

This is a very complicated situation (regardless of whether it's the husband or the wife who has a child from an affair). However, when it's the wife, there is an inevitable acceptance of the child into the family if the couple stay married (which, again, happens more often than people think). And concern for the well-being of the child often becomes the "glue" that holds the couple together in their effort to recover and rebuild.

If it's the husband who has a child from an affair, there are many more possible options of what may happen. I've heard from people who have dealt with this issue in a number of different ways. For most, the attitude was to try to deal with the third party and child similar to the way they would deal with an ex and a child from a former marriage. For some, they were unable to accommodate this situation and tried to "force" a choice. For some wives, the child was the "last straw" (so to speak) and they were unable to find a way to resolve the issues surrounding the child, so decided to end the marriage. But on the other end of the spectrum, one husband and wife even took the child from the affair to raise (after the other woman didn't want the child once she didn't get the husband).

If ever there were a situation for which there is no ideal solution, this is it. It may help to realize that with really complex situations like this there are no clear/easy answers—and nothing about this whole ordeal is black and white or written in stone. Since any "solution" is difficult because it's so complicated, each person who faces this dilemma needs to make their own decision based on all the factors involved in their particular situation. And since they are the ones who must live with the consequences of the decision, no one else can tell them what to do.

There will be better times and worse times; but at any given moment, we do well to simply do the best we can at that time, knowing that things may be better/easier at some point in the future. The bottom line is to realize that there is no simple advice as to how to handle it; it's an ongoing process of continuing to think as clearly as possible about all the complicated factors.

And there's certainly no simple advice as to how to recover; however, the most critical element in the recovery may be the degree to which the husband and wife can make a joint effort to face this challenge together and shift their focus to the future rather than dwelling on the past. This doesn't mean ignoring or denying the reality of what has happened. It just means following the guidelines that are generally helpful in recovery.

When there's a child from the affair?

Question #1:

I have chosen to stay married to my husband despite his affair and resulting child. It's been a year - how do I let go of my hurt, anger, and resentment?

Question #2:

I have a happy successful marriage of over 30 years. Just found out recently that husband had an ongoing affair that produced a child the same age as our marriage. I am having a very hard time dealing with this. I know it was a very long time ago, but I just found out and it has raised all sorts of doubts in my mind. I never thought once that he cheated on me in our marriage; he is a very good father and a loving husband. But I also thought the same before our marriage. I need help in dealing with this.

Question #3:

I'm looking for information on dealing with an affair AND a child being born as a result. How to I cope and handle this pain. Can you help?

Question #4:

What if your husband had an affair and a child is born from the woman he had the affair with? We have been married for almost 12 years and our children are 10 & 15. He had a child before our marriage and we were dating, but I decided to marry him and accept the child anyway since he was conceived before our marriage. He is almost 13 yrs old. The child in my question will be 4 this year and this child was conceived by a woman my husband and I both know.

Question #5:

My husband's affair produced a child. Your advice on rebuilding a marriage after an affair is repeatedly to sever any connections with the third party. My husband and I want to stay together and rebuild our marriage, but he can't sever his relationship completely when there is a child involved. How do I or we deal with this?

Question #6 (from the other woman who had child):

I have two children from a man that is recently married. Our first son came from the short time he and his wife were taking "time off." Well now we are on our second child. And even though I want my children to have their father, I believe it would be best if we had no contact with him at all. I don't mind him being a part of their lives, but I don't want him to use the children against my emotions, indicating that we may be a family. Please any advice will help to give me strength and insight.

Peggy's Response:

These questions clearly show that when a child results from an affair, it greatly compounds the pain and difficulty for all involved. As I've said in the past, with all the additional issues related to this kind of situation, it's important not to lose sight of the fact that there is an innocent child involved—as well as often other innocent children already a part of the marriage. This means that the adults must all use enormous discipline and strength in order to do the best possible in a very bad situation.

Of all the particular situations related to affairs, having a child result from the affair is surely one of the more difficult. So I'll try to address some of the specific questions raised above, but also want to point to an article that is permanently posted under the "Articles about Affairs" section of the website titled "When there's a child from an affair."

Now...to focus on some of the specific questions raised in the above letters:

"It's been a year - how do I let go of my hurt, anger, and resentment?"

Even when no child is involved, no one "lets go of their hurt, anger, and resentment" after only one year. As I've repeatedly said, it takes at least two years—and even this is no guarantee. When a child is involved, it's likely to slow the process down even more. But the process of letting go of the hurt, etc., is the same in any situation.

Here is a list of the Key Steps involved in Personal Recovery:

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

"Having a hard time dealing with the fact of a child from an affair 30 years ago?"

The fact that this happened "a very long time ago" is irrelevant to the recovery process. Even though it took place 30 years ago—for her, it's as if it just happened because she just learned of it. Her husband may have a hard time understanding this, because for him it's "old news," but for her, it's brand new. So the recovery is likely to follow the typical path of any recovery effort. In fact, since the "child" is no longer young and therefore not having the same kind of ongoing impact on the marriage, the child per se may not be as difficult as the basic fact that he had an affair.

"Rebuilding a marriage when he can't sever his relationship completely because there is a child?"

More about the reference to the fact that I say it's important "to sever any connections with the third party"...

Every time I address this issue, I point out that this situation is the "exception to the rule" about severing contact with the third party. In fact, the only situations where it's legitimately reasonable to NOT sever contact is when there is a child or when the third party is a relative. (When the third party is a co-worker, this does not warrant this kind of exception because people can - and do - change jobs; it's all based on assessing their priorities.) But in most instances, severing contact is neither possible nor preferable when a child is involved.

One way to deal with this is to constantly keep in mind the innocence of the child and focusing on what's "best for the child"—which can sometimes lift people out of a very narrow focus only on their own personal pain. This effort by both the husband and the wife in trying to deal with this enormous challenge can serve to draw them together. In fact, the most critical element in the recovery may be the degree to which the husband and wife can make a joint effort to face this challenge together rather than the wife feeling she is dealing with it alone.

"What about the other woman who has a child?"

The final letter above is from the other woman who has had two children by a married man. This is a clear example of how difficult this situation is for everyone involved. Any advice for the woman in this situation is similar to that for the couple—there is NO single solution as to how to handle it.

See the following section from the page I referenced above that is permanently posted on the website:

Since any 'solution' is difficult because it's so complicated, each person who faces this dilemma needs to make their own decision based on all the factors involved in their particular situation. And since they are the ones who must live with the consequences of the decision, no one else can tell them what to do.

IMPACT ON CHILDREN FROM PARENT'S AFFAIR

What about the impact on the children?

Question:

I am concerned about how exposing your young children to a cheating parent's partner can affect the child's well-being. I feel it is not a good idea. What do you think—and do you have any sort of evidence or statistics on how it can affect them?

Peggy's Response:

I don't recall ever seeing a formal "study" of this issue, so I don't have any real "evidence" or statistics about it. But regardless of what kind of evidence there might be, in the final analysis each person needs to do what feel right for *them*. Since you clearly state you "feel it is not a good idea...", it doesn't really matter what some "expert" might say; you need to trust yourself.

The only factor to be considered in determining how to handle this is to be as honest with yourself as possible as to the *reasons* behind any particular belief about what's best or what actions to take. In other words, it's important to try to be as "objective" as possible—making decisions based strictly on what's better for the kids instead of claiming it's "for the sake of the kids" when it might be more a justification for trying to exact some kind of punishment or revenge on the spouse. For instance, when focusing on what's best for the children, it's important to remember that the degree of stress between their parents is *probably* more important than any other factor. Even though this is very emotional issue, I can only offer you encouragement for continuing to try to think straight and to do whatever works best for the whole family.

What about the other children?

Question:

What if the affair produces a child? The cheating spouses are in love but have other children and they want to do what's best for all involved?

Peggy's Response:

Realistically, there is no way to do something that is "best for all involved" in that everyone loses and is negatively impacted by this situation. However, since the "other children" are likely to be impacted, it's wise to discuss and plan for when and how to tell them about this "new" child.

First of all, it's very difficult to feel capable of telling the other children while still trying to absorb the sheer shock of the situation. But it's essential to move as quickly as possible toward being able to talk to the children.

One reason this is so important is that the children will almost certainly someday learn of it some other way. And finding out from someone else would not only mean they had to deal with the facts of the situation, but would have to deal with the additional pain of not having heard it from their parents.

It's also important that the telling be done by both parents together—primarily in order to set an example that everyone is in this together and that it is something that can be dealt with if everyone is committed to doing their best (whatever that may be on an individual basis).

Should we tell our 18-year-old daughter?

Question:

Should my husband confess to our 18-year-old daughter of his affairs that happened over 10 years ago? She knows we had severe problems but not the issue. I'm afraid she'll find out someday thru someone else and will feel dad wasn't honest to her. Could this affect her relationships with men in her life?

Peggy's Response:

In general, it's better to be honest with our kids about situations in our lives that are as significant as this—primarily for the reason mentioned above: if/when kids find out about something like this that has been withheld, they learn a lesson of dishonesty which can do a couple of things. It can lead them to feel they can't trust their parents to be honest with them, and it can lead them to feel they don't have to be honest with their parents—or with others.

As I have written about before, the main lesson that our own kids learned from this whole experience was the importance of honesty. It led them to be far more honest with us during their own teen years—and led them to be more honest in their own love relationships as adults.

So having laid the foundation for the benefits of telling, there are some subtle but significant factors to consider. First, there's the attitude involved in telling. For instance, the word "confess" is not an effective way of thinking about this; it's more important to think (and act) in terms of "telling" or "sharing," not "confessing."

Also, any telling is best done with both parents involved, not one or the other alone. This sends an important message that it's something you are sharing with them from a position of togetherness. It also avoids their wondering or comparing notes between what one says and the other may say.

While the decision as to whether to tell is up to each couple, it's important to think in terms of always "moving toward telling" in that you continuously work toward developing more and more honesty in all your significant relationships. (By the way, as I've written before, honesty is more than just "not lying;" it's "not withholding" relevant information.)

To read a couple of my Articles already posted on the Website about this issue, see:

“Telling the Children?”

“Impact of a Parent's Affair on Teenagers/Adult Kids”

This question leads me to share a “Comment” I also received this week that was not really a question, but that illustrates the above situation:

"Affairs affect many individuals, not just the individual who finds out their spouse has had an affair."

Should we tell our adult children?

Question:

It has only been two months since the discovery of my spouse's affair. He has ended the affair and is actively involved in trying to rebuild our marriage. How much should we share with our adult children, in their mid-to-late 20's. I suspect they know that something is wrong, but have not asked. We live in a small town, news sometimes travels fast and wouldn't like for them to find out from an outside party. Should we volunteer info?

Peggy's Response:

As those who have read much of my work know, I have a bias toward more rather than less honesty. Since the lack of honesty involved in secretly having an affair is such a key part of the problem, restoring honesty in all important relationships takes on great importance.

This does not mean that I recommend that in every instance everyone tell everything to everyone close to them. It simply means that for most people it works better to err on the side of more rather than less honesty—especially when it comes to the most important people in your life.

Now, to specifically address the issue of telling adult children: the specific question above is not "whether" to tell them, it is "how much should we share with them?" I understand that this means there is a recognition that "not telling" them at all would likely mean they would eventually find out from someone else anyway—which would definitely be much worse for everyone concerned.

So to start with the last question: "Should we volunteer info?" In general, it's better for you to open up the topic because it's likely to be very hard for them to actually ask. And especially since you "suspect they know something is wrong," it's not as if you'll be blindsiding them with this information.

There are, nevertheless, some guidelines that can make the telling a little less difficult for everyone. For instance:

- The most important factor is that both of you talk to them together. (This makes it clear that you are dealing with it together and working to rebuild the marriage.)

- It's important to talk to them at a time and in a place where everyone can be completely available and present without undue outside distractions.

- It's probably better to talk to them together (if that's feasible) rather than separately. That way they both get the same information and it avoids any issues related to one knowing without the other knowing, which could create secrecy and comparisons of what each was told.

Finally, back to the original question of "how much" to tell. It's probably wise to begin by giving a general overview of the situation without going into nitty-gritty details—and then to invite them to ask about anything else they want to know about. (Note that this situation is similar to the early days when having a "sex talk" with you kids; it's not likely to be completely dealt with in one conversation. It's just a matter of opening up the lines of communication.)

Most adult children (involved in their own lives) may be more concerned about what will happen next with their parents than about the details of what has already happened. So it's probably wise to volunteer information about whatever steps are being taken to recover and rebuild—without waiting for them to ask about that.

Isn't secrecy necessary to protect your teenaged children?

Question:

I understand the need to be more open about affairs, but when you live in a small community and you are trying to protect your teenaged children by keeping them from finding out, then secrecy is necessary, isn't it? I feel that they don't need to share this burden.

Peggy's Response:

Please note that the above question refers to an article I have posted on the website titled "Breaking the Code of Secrecy."

The concerns expressed in this question are understandable and legitimate, and I do *not* want to try to convince any particular person to go against their own judgment as to what's best in their own situation. But I do hope to have more dialogue about the pros and cons of more openness about this issue.

It's easy to see secrecy (especially as mentioned above in relation to teenaged children) as "necessary;" however, it's important to recognize that it's actually a choice that each person makes. And all choices involve consequences. And while it's easy to see the potential problems in being more open, we often fail to recognize the potential problems in not being honest. For instance, "family secrets" have a way of coming out at some point in the future, and the resultant turmoil becomes less about whatever "incident" was kept secret as about the dishonesty and deception involved. (This is all the more ironic in that the very basis of all affairs is a willingness to be dishonest and deceptive.)

Even more important, we fail to recognize the potential advantages in being more open and honest. For instance, the overall impact on our teenagers was a renewed appreciation for the importance of honesty. Our relationship with our kids had always been based on honesty, and this just put that commitment to honesty to the test. Our kids were 11 and 13 when we told them about our experience. They were 16 and 18 when we wrote a book about our experience back in 1980. (Of course, we were far more open than most people would be due to the fact that we wrote the book—and talked about it in the media.)

In fact, when a reporter from our local small-town newspaper came to our home to interview us, she was fascinated when our 16-year-old son entered the room, and wanted to ask him about his reactions. Here are some quotes from the article she wrote:

Andy said, 'I guess Vicki and I were both aware that something was happening between our parents. It didn't shock me or anything when they told us. Vicki and I have always had a good relationship with our mother. We've always been able to talk to her. After they told us, I just figured they were still our parents, and we kind of went on from there.' Peggy said she and James felt they related well to their children because they were willing to freely communicate with them. 'That means telling them honestly how we feel as well as listening to them,' Peggy said. 'Most people are not exposed to an open, honest, growing relationship when they themselves are growing up.'

(end of excerpt from Hilton Head Island Packet, July 1980)

In 1998 I was interviewed for another article that includes quotes from a psychotherapist about the potential "positive impact on the children" from disclosing an affair. (See the article posted on the website titled "Talking Honestly With Your Children." As alluded to in this article, it's possible that giving kids a more realistic understanding of the risk of affairs may help them avoid having this experience in their own lives—which might be the most potentially positive benefit of all.)

There are, of course, other considerations (in addition to concerns about the children) that need to be assessed. Here are some excerpts from *The Monogamy Myth* that shed light on some other potential benefits of more openness:

Some Benefits of Speaking Out

There are several important messages being sent when you speak out about your own experience. You are rejecting the idea that the affair was caused by a personal inadequacy. (And, if you're still married, it shows you also understand it was not strictly a personal failure of your spouse.) This causes others to rethink their own attitudes. People expect you to feel embarrassed and ashamed; when you don't, it causes them to stop and wonder why.

*Another important benefit of being open about your own experience is that it diminishes the sense of aloneness felt by those people who are still suffering silently, thinking an affair is only their personal problem. For instance, at the time we wrote *Beyond Affairs*, our daughter was a senior in high school. Her best friend asked the English teacher for permission to use our book as the subject of a book report. The teacher agreed--and read the book as well.*

A few days later the teacher appeared at my door to tell me that she had known for some time that her husband was having an affair, but had not been able to talk to anyone about it. She knew her relationship was unrecoverable, but she hadn't been able to bring herself to take action. Learning about my experience helped her break her silence, prompting her to begin to face her own situation... Sometimes, all a person needs is to know they're not alone in order to break the code of silence for themselves. And all of us can participate in making this possible.

(end of excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*.)

The bottom line is that this issue may be a little like any major effort to change societal attitudes. The assumptions about affairs (that they only happen to "bad" people" or in "bad" marriages) are so ingrained that the first people to challenge these assumptions by openly discussing their own experiences may be unfairly challenged. While I don't mean to put this on the level of the civil rights issue or the women's rights issue, it may take that kind of commitment to change the old assumptions. As it is, people really don't know much about affairs—primarily because of the Code of Secrecy.

P.S. As mentioned earlier, we were far more open than most people (in that we "went public" with our story), so our experience was not necessarily representative of the reactions to simply being open with those close to you. But for those who want to read about our experience in *Breaking the Code of Secrecy*, see the article on the website titled "Reactions to Going Public."

Should I tell?

Question #1:

I suspect that my daughter's husband may be involved with someone else. Should I tell my daughter?

Question #2:

I am a 40 yr. old woman who works in the same office (different businesses) as my father. As a result of our close proximity, I have discovered he is having an affair. My parents have been married for 42 years. Do I tell my mother? I have already confronted by father.

Peggy's Response:

This is an issue that arises repeatedly. The frequency of this question indicates just how many people are affected by affairs, whether directly or indirectly through someone they care about and wish to protect. So even though I've addressed it in the past, I'll do so again.

In the past, I have offered an overview of the considerations regarding "whether to tell," but this time I'll go ahead and provide the complete excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth* where I address this.

While this question arises regarding both friends and family members, the two questions above happen to be about close relatives—a daughter and a mother. At first glance, most people would say *of course*, you tell. And that may very well be the right decision for some people, especially when dealing with close relatives. But this decision is more complex than that initial knee-jerk response and deserves to be carefully made on an individual basis—by *first* being aware of and considering *all* the factors that are discussed in the following excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*.

DO YOU EVER TELL THE SPOUSE?

There's a special challenge in appropriately handling the situation when the partner of a friend or relative is involved in an affair that has not yet been confronted. It can be very disturbing to be in this position. Naturally, each person will need to assess the situation for themselves, based on their own knowledge of the people involved. If it's someone in the immediate family, it's even more a matter for individual determination.

There are some guidelines, however, that can help in dealing responsibly with this issue if it's a friend's partner who is having an affair. (These guidelines may also be helpful in deciding how to deal with the more difficult situation of an affair in the family.) First, if the one having an affair doesn't know that you know, it's probably a good idea to inform them. This may have an effect on their thinking or their behavior, but the purpose is not to threaten or demand; it's simply to make them aware of your knowledge of the affair.

As far as whether or not you should share this information with your friend, it depends on your assessment of whether or not they would 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 at a time they may be unable to deal with it. It's important to know that someone wants the information before you give it to them. In other words, if your friend asks if you think their partner is having an affair, you probably shouldn't lie. By asking, they are showing a readiness (or at least a willingness) to face it.

However, if they don't ask, you should wait for some indication that they either suspect, want to know, or would be able to handle it. So the general rule might be "don't lie, but don't volunteer." In other words, if they ask, they're probably prepared to face it, so you shouldn't lie to them. But if they don't ask, it may be because they really don't want to deal with it yet, so you

shouldn't volunteer the information. The best approach would be to help them become better prepared, so that when they finally do confront it, they'll be able to deal with it in a way that allows them to survive the experience.

Of course, there are exceptions. Perhaps you have a joint commitment with a friend or relative to share absolutely everything, and they've made it clear they want you to tell them anything you know that might affect them. If you feel you'd be being dishonest to this commitment by not telling them, then you might not wait for them to ask. As mentioned earlier, this is a very personal decision that each person must make as responsibly as possible for the sake of everyone concerned.

(end of excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*)

Kids being affected by affairs?

Question #1:

I have a situation between my father and myself. I have a feeling he is having an affair with some skank. I am only 12 years old, and I know a lot for my age; I know as much as an 18 year old knows. He and my mother sometimes get into arguments. He always has to bring up, "Well you never give me what I want" (which he's talking about sex). One time I found about 5 condoms in his drawer in some socks, one was already open and was wrapped into a napkin. I have no idea what I should do.

Question #2:

My husband had an affair about a year and a half ago that lasted 4 months. Our oldest daughter found out about 6 months ago and our youngest daughter 3 weeks ago. Is it wrong to expect our children to keep this a secret from their friends and our family?

Question #3:

I have read your website since my own personal experience about two years ago. I do some work with teenagers and the subject of sex. Is there a higher chance of having an affair-free marriage by being sexually abstinent before marriage?

Peggy's Response:

The above letters have a common focus—how teens (and pre-teens) may be affected by affairs. The primary factor for me in all such circumstances relates to the issue of *secrecy*.

The first letter from a 12-year-old boy illustrates a situation that happens more often than you might think—where a child finds out about a parent's affair before the spouse. (The declaration that he "knows a lot for my age" is often true of children in such situations; they often know far more than parents realize.) And all too often they're put in this impossible situation of what to say about it and to whom.

Since the mother may already know (in a sensing way) but not want to be forced to face it, acknowledge it, or confront it, it's problematic to go directly to her. But while it's generally best to talk directly to the person having an affair, informing them that you know what's happening, it's questionable that a 12-year-old could handle this in a way that doesn't bring down the wrath of the father.

It would clearly be better for the boy to have an "advocate," someone he could confide in who could determine the best course of action and perhaps even intervene in an appropriate way—similar to the preferred way for a child to function when they are being abused. (Frankly, a situation like this does create an "abusive" situation for the child.) Of course, it's still up to the child to be able to determine who to turn to for this kind of support. But at least involving another adult takes him out of the middle and prevents him from trying to handle something that he is ill-equipped to handle alone. Keeping this kind of secret all to himself is just too much for a child of his age to bear.

The second letter raises the question of whether the two daughters (who know of the affair) "should be expected to keep this a secret from their friends and our family."

Again, the burden of this secrecy is usually too much to ask of children. The insistence on secrecy also increases their pain in feeling this is just too "awful and terrible" for anyone to know about. (Anything that is seen as too awful to tell about is often felt to be too awful to get over.)

This does not, however, mean that they are prepared to deal with the potential reactions of "telling" others. It's not their place to tell; it's the responsibility of the parents to inform other relevant people. The isolation and pressure for the daughters from having to keep such a "big secret" is a great burden for them to bear. But informing others who are close to the family allows the girls to have potential outlets for discussing their feelings about this with others who care about them.

That's not to say this will all be smooth or easy; it's simply that it's better than the alternative of expecting them to keep the secret. And it also prevents the almost inevitable time when others would have found out anyway, and the girls would have been forced to keep the secret for nothing. For more on this, see the article under the "Articles about Affairs" section of the website titled "Isn't secrecy necessary to protect your teenaged children?"

The third letter asks "Is there a higher chance of having an affair-free marriage by being sexually abstinent before marriage?" It's understandable to want to figure out how to guarantee that a marriage will never be touched by an affair. But, frankly, there is no ONE factor that can do that—not being sexually abstinent, being religious, being of high morals, marrying someone with the same values/priorities/commitments, taking vows, intending to be monogamous, etc. That's because "avoiding affairs" is an ongoing process throughout the life of a long-term marriage. It's not a one-time decision or condition that settles things once and for all.

At the risk of pounding the issue into the ground—the only way to avoid affairs on an ongoing basis is to fully commit to *honesty* and practice it throughout the marriage. See the article under the "Articles about Affairs" section of the website titled "Preventing Affairs."

This whole issue of affairs as they relate to the impact on children is one of great significance. In fact, I believe we won't have much impact on the prevalence of affairs until we begin raising children who don't learn the typical lesson that "sex and secrecy go hand in hand." There are a number of articles dealing with "Issues Related to Children" posted under the "Articles about Affairs" section of the website.

Should he talk to our teenagers?

Question:

My husband had a long-term affair on and off for many years. It has been 16 months since I found out and we are well into recovery. Our girls are 17 & 15 and know about the affair. My husband has never talked to them about it and I feel he should. He is afraid to because of their reaction. What are your thoughts about this?

Peggy's Response:

Since this letter indicates the teenagers "know about the affair" (but their father "has never talked to them about it"), I assume that means that it was the mother who told them about their father's affair. Ideally, this telling would have been done initially by *both* parents together. But it's still important for them to hear directly from their Dad. Reestablishing a good relationship doesn't happen by just sitting back and waiting for them to "get over it." It requires stepping up and trying to help them deal with it so they *can* eventually recover from the impact of this experience.

Knowing about such a significant event but not hearing it directly from the person involved) makes for a weird/awkward situation—as if this somehow *can't* be discussed directly from their father. While it's understandable that he's "afraid because of their reaction"—*not* talking to them leaves them to simmer in their feelings, but calmly talking (and listening to them) acknowledges their concerns and provides a chance to begin to rebuild. (Frankly, a failure to do this kind of talking is like "ignoring the elephant in the room.")

This would not be a one-time "talk," but the beginning of more open communication. It's important to "be there" to respond to questions and to support them in their own efforts to deal with the situation. A failure to do this sends a message that we can't/don't need to talk about our mistakes and what we learned from them—which is *not* the message a parent wants to send to their kids. It also sends the message that "we can't talk about sexual issues" in this family—which reinforces a general mindset that "sex and secrecy go hand-in-hand."

And this message is one that we do *not* want our kids to learn—because it leads them to be secretive about the sexual issues they will face in their own lives. (When kids can't talk to their parents about sexual issues while growing up, they're unlikely to be able to talk easily about sexual issues with their future spouses or their own kids, perpetuating the problems inherent in so much secrecy about these issues.)

In general, it's better to be honest with our kids about situations in our lives that are as significant as this—primarily for the reason mentioned above: if/when kids find out about something like this that has been withheld, they learn a lesson of dishonesty which can do a couple of things. It can lead them to feel they can't trust their parents to be honest with them, and it can lead them to feel they don't have to be honest with their parents—or with others.

The reality is that this crisis can be used as an opportunity to help the teenagers learn some important lessons that will serve them well in the future. For instance, this is an opportunity to impress upon them the importance of honesty in issues related to sex—as well as other areas of life.

By providing them with more information as to how and why this happened, you may help prevent them from facing the same kind of situation in their own lives. Even as teenagers, they face choices about dealing with their own love relationships—so if they can learn that honesty (and lack of deception) are absolutely critical to establishing and maintaining quality relationships, it will serve them well.

As I've written before, the main lesson that our own kids learned from talking with their Dad and me about his affairs...was the importance of honesty. It led them to be far more honest with us during their own teen years—and led them to be more honest in their own love relationships as adults.

I encourage reading a couple of my Articles about Affairs already posted on the Website about this issue, titled: "Isn't secrecy necessary to protect your teenage children" and "Impact of a Parent's Affair on Teenagers/Adult Kids."

Will teenage kids lose respect if you stay?

Question:

I had the affair and our kids (teen girls) hate me, and my husband is afraid they won't respect him if we work it out. We are both committed to working through this. What do we do?

Peggy's Response:

Many couples are concerned about how to deal with the reactions of their kids when they learn of a parent's affair—especially teenagers who are particularly idealistic. And it can be even more of a problem when it's the mother who has an affair because women in general (and "mothers" in particular) are still expected to be more virtuous than men/fathers.

In fact, 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.

However, keeping a secret of this magnitude from the kids is even more problematic—because it sets up a family dynamic of secrecy that can have far-reaching and long-lasting consequences. (Plus, this kind of secret almost always comes out eventually, at which point the kids must deal with the fact that they discovered it some other way rather than having it shared with them by their parents.)

To focus directly on the specific issue of whether or not to "work it out" based on concerns about losing the respect of the kids if you stay...

Perhaps it's a "damned if you do, damned if you don't" scenario; however, concern about losing the kids' respect by staying married is not nearly as critical as concern for the damage done to the kids if their whole lives are turned upside down through divorce.

Frankly, raising this "respect" concern sounds a little like trying to justify getting a divorce—despite saying he's "committed to working through this." If he's really committed to working through it, he won't be stopped by fears of losing his kids' respect for staying. Also, since the kids already say they "hate" the mother, gradually healing this breach should be the bigger concern for both parents. (Obviously, it's an unhealthy situation for a kid to hate a parent, and leaving in many ways would tend to prolong the time the kids would carry this hatred.)

As I said, kids tend to have an idealistic image of life. They probably assume their mother's affair means she is a "bad person" and that the marriage is a "bad marriage" that deserves to end. But wiser people recognize that affairs happen to all kinds of people in all kinds of marriages. And it's the wiser adults who need to educate the kids rather than the kids controlling major life decisions made by the parents.

Frankly, kids don't need to be caught between their parents. Regardless of the pain and difficulty the parents face in dealing with this, it's up to them to present a united front to the kids as far as making decisions about the future of the family. Parents need to put the long-term well-being of the whole family ahead of the (understandable) initial emotional reactions of teenagers.

Also, a decision to divorce should not be made quickly when everyone's emotions are running high. It takes time and rational thought about the "prospects for the future," before making such a life-changing decision. For more about making this decision, see the article on the website titled: "Deciding whether to stay married or get a divorce."

One other factor that may be at play in situations where it's the wife who has had an affair is that people tend to assume that men are more likely to get a divorce in these cases. However, the results

of my Survey on Affairs showed that of the 1,083 respondents 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 stay with a spouse who has an affair?"

The decision to stay married (regardless of whether it's the husband or the wife who has an affair) is best made on the basis of the prospects for the future of the marriage. The most critical factors for working through this and rebuilding the marriage include: severing contact with the third party, being willing to answer questions, and hanging in through the long process of dealing with the emotional fallout.

So there are many factors to consider in coming to a decision as to whether or not to rebuild the marriage. It is far more complex and important than to be guided by the emotional reaction of teenagers. For more about teenagers and secrecy, see the article on the website titled: "Isn't secrecy necessary to protect your teenaged children?"

The bottom line is that there needs to be more open communication about all sexual issues if we are to avoid a lot of the damage caused by deception. So this experience can motivate parents to do a better job at teaching kids the importance of honesty. In fact, parents can help their kids avoid the kind of deception that is not only inherent in affairs, but is so common when teens begin their own sexual explorations—and begin deceiving their parents. For more on this, see the article on the website (under the "Marriage and Family" section titled: "For Parents Only: Providing Sex Education for your Children."

Should I tell mom about dad's affair?

Question:

I'm in my late twenties and recently discovered that my dad had an affair that may have lasted a number of years. My parents don't know that I know. Should I bring it up?

Peggy's Response:

As is clear from many of the letters I receive, affairs affect far more people than just the couple. There are often issues for friends and family members as well. This is especially difficult when the "children" (of whatever age) become aware of the affair before the "deceived parent" knows about it.

Sometimes, however, it's a case where (due to the secrecy surrounding affairs), both the parent and the child know about the affair, but each is concerned about telling the other for fear of hurting them. Parents often try to "protect" their children from the truth, and children (like the young adult who wrote this question) wonder whether to "protect" the secret as well.

I have a general bias when it comes to parents telling children that favors always working toward telling the children at some point—for a variety of reasons I've written about in the past. (To read some of that, see the last 3 articles listed under the category: "Issues Related to Children" on the list of Articles about Affairs.)

But when it comes to children telling the parent who (supposedly) doesn't know...there is a different set of guidelines. Basically here are some things to consider:

It's possible that the "deceived parent" *does* already know, but doesn't want to openly acknowledge that they know—because they don't know what to do about it and don't want to have to face it until they figure this out for themselves. (I know first-hand how this works, because I strongly suspected my husband's affairs for 7 years, but wasn't ready to confront it—so kept my suspicions secret from everyone.)

It's possible that the "deceived parent" doesn't know "for sure" (and doesn't *want* to know for sure)—again because they simply aren't ready to deal with it. (Again, that's what happened in my situation during that 7-year period of waiting; I'm concerned that if I had been forced to face it before I was ready, I may have simply "reacted" by getting a divorce—instead of preparing myself to be able to face it and work through it.)

Anyway, I'm generally biased against "telling"—particularly if (as appears from the above question) the affair happened sometime in the past and is not ongoing). So the *general* guideline is: "Don't lie if asked, but don't volunteer if *not* asked."

So if someone *doesn't* ask about their spouse's affair, it's usually better to wait for some indication that they want to know and are prepared to handle it. But if they *do* ask, they're showing a readiness (or at least a willingness) to face it. Basically, it's important to honor their wishes and their timetable.

This does not mean, however, that you "say nothing." It's just that what you have to say needs *first* to be directed to the parent who has had an affair. In other words, if the one who had an affair doesn't know that you know, it's probably a good idea to inform them. The purpose of this is not to threaten or demand; it's simply to make them aware of your knowledge of the affair—and to let them know that you will not in any way "cover" for them if you're ever asked about it.

The impact of this action may lead to changes in the behavior or actions of the person who had an affair. And any "telling" is best done when it is disclosed by the spouse who had the affair rather

than being exposed by someone else—because this offers a better chance for the couple to be able to effectively deal with the fallout from the affair.

So the bottom line is that it's wise to wait for some indication that the "deceived person" either suspects or wants to know. Again, the simplest guideline might be "don't lie, but don't volunteer." (More specifically, if they ask, they're probably prepared to face it, so you shouldn't lie to them. But if they don't ask, it may be because they really don't want to deal with it, so it may not be wise to volunteer the information.) In the meantime, the best approach is to become as well-informed as possible about the whole issue of affairs to be better prepared to help them deal with this if/when that time comes.

P.S. Please note that all of the above perspective is offered only as "general guidelines"—but each individual (knowing their own family dynamics) needs to make their own decision as to precisely how to handle this very sensitive and difficult situation.

How can I help my daughter avoid this pain?

Question:

I am 1 year out of "recovering." Your books have helped tremendously. My daughter is 23 and to be married. What can I tell her to expect when 80% of marriages go through this? I don't want to disillusion her, but I wish someone had prepared me; it may have helped to mitigate the pain.

Peggy's Response:

This is an important question—because it focuses on the importance of preparing newly married people to avoid ever having to face the issue of affairs. (We don't want to settle for helping "mitigate the pain" of an affair, as mentioned above; rather, we want to prevent it from happening in the first place.)

Preventing affairs begins with "dealing with attractions to others." James and I wrote a book called *Making Love Stay* that includes a few pages that address the issue of dealing with attractions, thus preventing affairs.

Note: This book is NOT about affairs, but simply provides some understandings and tools to help couples sustain a lasting love over a long period of time. In fact, many people have given this book to newlyweds so they can be better prepared to deal with many of the numerous challenges of marriage.

Anyway, here's an excerpt containing the information included in *Making Love Stay* that might be helpful in preventing affairs.

Dealing with Attractions to Others

1. Accept that attractions to others are normal and inevitable, no matter how much you love each other.

You probably realize it's natural for your partner (and yourself) to find others attractive. Nevertheless, it's probably something you don't want to think about. You'd like to believe it won't happen, so you may convince yourself that somehow your relationship will be different.

If you try to deny the possibility of attractions, you send a subtle (or not so subtle) signal to your partner that you don't want to know about any of their feelings of attraction toward others. Since attractions are both normal and inevitable, you're in essence sending a message that says, "Lie to me; pretend you're never attracted to anyone else." This, of course, causes other problems related to honesty that can have serious consequences for your relationship.

Accepting the reality of attractions to others is the first step toward being able to keep them in perspective. If you see attractions as a direct threat to your love (thinking that if your partner loved you they would never be attracted to anyone else), you're granting power to attractions that they would not otherwise possess.

2. Talk honestly about your attractions and how to deal with them in order to reduce their power and effect.

Attractions are not, in and of themselves, a problem. The problem comes when they are acted on. And the best way to decrease the likelihood of that happening is to honestly discuss this issue and your feelings about it on an ongoing basis.

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.

3. Be aware of the dangers in acting on your attractions.

You may have every intention of being monogamous and no idea of becoming involved in an extramarital affair. (In fact, most people profess their intention to be monogamous when they marry and express disapproval of affairs.) This does not, however, prevent you from being vulnerable to having an affair.

Realistically, no one is immune—including you and your partner—from getting involved in an affair at some point during marriage. So it's essential that you recognize this risk and deliberately focus on the consequences involved in an affair. The tendency to focus only on the excitement and positive feelings often blocks your ability to think clearly or to contemplate the repercussions of acting on those feelings.

While you may rationalize that an affair brings some temporary pleasure without long-term consequences, you're kidding yourself. The dishonesty and deception inherent in having an affair will affect your relationship and are likely to cause serious problems—whether or not the affair is ever discovered.

4. Recognize that recovery is possible if an affair does take place.

Your ideas about extramarital affairs (who has them, why, and who is to blame) are likely to be based on a very personal view of this issue. You may believe that affairs happen only because of a particular lack in the individual or a particular lack in the marriage. But affairs happen to all kinds of people in all kinds of relationships—and you can't fully understand why they happen by looking only at your own marriage.

This is such an emotionally-charged issue that you may not want to think about it unless you absolutely must. But if either you or your partner has an affair, you will need to try to think as clearly as possible, despite the emotions. In order to recover, you will need a great deal of information, understanding and perspective. Overcoming the emotional impact involves getting beyond personal blame and understanding what happened in the context of society as a whole.

*Contrary to popular belief, ours is not a monogamous society. While society appears to uphold monogamy, there are many societal factors that actually serve to support and encourage affairs. (A more thorough guide to understanding and recovering from affairs is provided in our earlier book, *The Monogamy Myth*.)*

(end of excerpt from *Making Love Stay*)

Below are some other ideas about preventing affairs included in *The Monogamy Myth*:

How Can Affairs be Prevented?

Prevention is possible only through a commitment to Honesty, not a "promise" to be monogamous. (Definition of Honesty: not withholding relevant information.)

What won't work:

Couples can't avoid affairs by assuming monogamy or even by promising monogamy without discussing the issue. And they can't avoid affairs by making threats as to what they would do if it happened. Either of these paths creates a cycle of dishonesty. In either case, people don't feel free to admit being attracted to someone else. If they don't admit these attractions, then they won't admit being tempted. If they don't admit being tempted, then they certainly won't admit it if and when they finally act on the attraction. The effect on the relationship is to cause it to be filled with jealousy and suspicion, as well as making it less likely that it will be monogamous.

What will work:

On the other hand, by specifically making a commitment to honesty, 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.

Why honesty works:

The process of discussing attractions actually decreases the likelihood of acting on them, because it focuses on the potential problems of acting on them; whereas when a person is tempted to have an affair, their private thoughts usually dwell only on the potential pleasures. There's an added fascination and excitement about feelings that are kept secret as compared to those that are acknowledged and discussed. Shedding the cold light of day on secret desires goes a long way toward diminishing their power.

Who can use this process?

This process of acknowledging attractions and discussing how they are to be handled is one that both married and unmarried couples need to address prior to any problem with affairs. Constantly wondering and worrying about this issue creates a strain between partners that may prevent their developing a sense of trust in each other. They need to talk through their feelings about monogamy and attractions to other people on an ongoing basis as their relationship develops.

Bottom Line: There are no guarantees.

The issue of monogamy is never settled once and for all. It requires ongoing honest discussion of the issue. This 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.

(end of information from The Monogamy Myth)

DEALING WITH FAMILY MEMBERS

How do I cope with my family?

Question:

My husband had a two-night affair with a woman he met online. We are now trying to work through the pain and rebuild trust. At the time I turned to my parents and my brother for support. Although they were great at the time, they are now pressuring me to follow through with the divorce that I had originally planned. I am not so sure that's what I want now. How do I cope with them?

Peggy's Response:

This is a perfect illustration of how those who love us (with the best of intentions) can make things even more difficult. Unfortunately, a relative's sense of this situation as a "family" problem may cause them to feel so personally involved that they get caught up in their own feelings about the affair. They may have their own very strong opinions about what the person should do and may feel even more justified in giving advice—which just adds an additional burden for a person in a situation like the one described above.

Since it's so important to be able to turn to family members in times of crisis—it's not reasonable to second-guess having turned to family for immediate support. However, once the immediate emotional shock has subsided, the family needs to respect the individual's personal decisions about what to do long-term.

Ironically, most people tend to think that "deciding whether to stay married or get a divorce" should be one of the *first* orders of business upon learning of a spouse's affair. But in fact, this decision should *not* be made in the early stages when the strong emotions make it impossible to think clearly. During the initial emotional reaction to learning about an affair, a person is in no position to make such a life-altering decision. In fact, the decision as to whether or not to stay married needs to be based on the "prospects for the future of the marriage" rather than just on what happened in the past.

So it's important to help parents understand how their pressure impacts your own sense of yourself and your ability to cope. When a person find out their mate has had an affair, they usually feel terribly weakened and they need to develop strength and confidence in their ability to cope with this situation. This is made much more difficult when other family members are trying to tell them what they should do.

It's also important to ask family members to respect an effort like the one described above: "We are now trying to work through the pain and rebuild trust." In the most caring way possible, there's a need to help parents and other relatives understand that since you are the one who will live with the consequences of whatever decision is made—you are the one who needs to make the decision without undue pressure or interference.

So it's a combination of trying to help family members get more perspective *both* about the general need to delay such an important decision until there is less emotional impact *and* about the need to respect whatever decision is ultimately made—regardless of whether they disagree or fail to understand.

Should children, parents, family be told?

Question:

Should young children (6 & 10), parents, family be told of my wife's affair—or keep it our secret?

Peggy's Response:

There is no absolute answer to this question, but my general bias is toward more honesty and more disclosure rather than less. Partly, this is because the idea of "keeping it our secret" is not something that anyone can completely guarantee will be possible. And if at some point in the future any of the people mentioned above learn about the affair, then they not only have to deal with the facts at that time—but are also likely to be quite upset at not having been told earlier. So as each couple makes their own decision about how to handle this, I'll offer a few ideas of what usually helps IF family members are told.

When it comes to telling parents or other family members (other than children), there are some things that can make a difference in the way the information is received. It helps if both members of the couple do the telling together—rather than having the one who had an affair "confess" it or having the spouse "expose" it. Further, it's important to let the parents and other family members know that you want/expect them to respect your decision to work on the marriage (if that's the case)—and that you do *not* want them to criticize/judge either of you for how you deal with this. (Example: I personally had to clearly tell my husband's sister that I simply would not listen to her "running down" James, saying things like she thought I should leave him and she didn't blame me for anything, etc.)

When it comes to telling children, it's even *more* critical that the information come from *both* their parents. Children of *any* age are likely to have picked up on the idea that there is some kind of emotional crisis taking place in their parents' lives, so it's not necessarily protecting them to avoid telling them what it's about. However, with children as young as 6 and 10, it's enough to simply talk in terms of the fact that their mother (or father) had had another "boyfriend" (or "girlfriend"), that they were very sorry, it is over, and mommy and daddy are working through it. Then tell them they can ask any questions they have at any time if they want to know more.

What to do about my parents?

Question:

I recently learned that one of my parents has been cheating on the other—and intends to leave. I'm grown and no longer live at home, but I don't know what to do about this.

Peggy's Response:

When a person learns this kind of information about a parent, it puts them in an unbelievably difficult situation. While there are some general guidelines appropriate for an adult friend who knows about an affair, these guidelines may not be as appropriate in this situation. And I would certainly never presume to know the best course of action in any specific situation.

However, *in general*, it's better to talk to the person (in this case, the parent who is having the affair) and let them know that you "know" and that as their child you are involved—whether you want to be or not, and you feel you cannot stand by and do nothing.

In most situations like this, it's more effective to try to talk in a rational way. Despite whatever intense feelings there may be, the best possibility of being "heard" is to avoid being overly judgmental or overly emotional. It may also be helpful to talk to one other safe, trusted adult before talking to the parent who is having the affair. This is just to know that there's someone else who knows what you're going to do and is there for support.

Then the discussion probably needs to focus on getting clarity. It's usually not wise to "threaten," but just to be clear that there will be no effort to "lie" or "cover for" or in any way "protect" the parent who is having an affair. It might also be helpful to discuss just when/how/who is going to tell the other parent. (This may prompt the parent having an affair to focus seriously on this difficult task and recognize the significance of the way it is handled.) There's no way to avoid much of the pain that's sure to be involved in all this, but making this responsible effort can help to avoid or soften the shock of a surprise exit.

While the person in the position of the writer of this question may struggle with the impact this will have on their own lives, it's important to focus first and foremost on the impact on the life of the parent who is being left. This may call for temporarily reversing roles and "parenting" the parent who is in pain—by being as comforting and compassionate as possible.

In the final analysis, each person needs to decide for themselves exactly how to proceed with something this sensitive. The above is shared only as some ideas to consider in addressing this difficult situation.

How can I deal with my father's affair?

Question:

Fairly recently, I found out that my father had an affair while my mother was pregnant with me. It caused devastating results. How can I deal with this? My mother is still living but my Dad is not. Are there any specific resources available on this subject?

Peggy's Response:

Most of the attention regarding the impact on children of learning about their parent's affair (regardless of their age) has dealt with learning about it at (or near) the time the affair took place. However, just recently there has been a growing recognition of the potential impact on adult children—who either learn much later (as the above letter describes) or who feel they're still being affected in terms of their *own* love relationships.

In the above letter, it appears that one of the issues is the fact that Dad is no longer living—therefore not available for getting some clarity/closure. Wanting to talk to him is understandable; however, in reality, it's unlikely that he would be willing/able to provide the kind of insight/understanding that would provide clarity/closure. (Many/most people who have affairs don't completely understand it themselves—since affairs are not "rational" acts in the first place.) And even if they have some degree of understanding, they're unlikely (especially after so many years) to be willing/able to talk about it in a way that would be truly helpful.

Affairs often lead to "devastating results" for *many* people, and the specific nature of the devastating results referred to above are not clear. In a case like this, it might help to realize that even though it happened long ago, the impact is *as if* it just happened! And whenever someone learns about an affair (whether of a spouse or a parent), there's an inevitable difficult period of assimilating this new information into what had been a person's "reality." So part of the answer to the question: "How can I deal with this?" 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. (For instance, recognizing that affairs are quite prevalent and happen to all kinds of people from all walks of life.)
- 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.

How can I support my sister?

Question:

How should I as a family member act or what should I do...to support my sister whose husband is having an affair? My sister told me about it; I know it was a tough thing to do, but I will support her to the Nth degree. I'm just not sure how to do it.

Peggy's Response:

This issue is *so* important (and so seldom recognized): the critical role of friends and family and how they can be helpful—or at least not make things worse, which is too often the case. I've written more about this in "The Monogamy Myth," but here are some of the general thoughts:

One of the most important benefits of talking to friends and family is simply that it helps most people break through the sense of isolation they feel at this time. When friends and family can simply "be there" for those who need their support, this can play an important part in the healing process.

Unfortunately, even with the best of intentions, most people can't seem to resist the temptation to give advice. Sometimes a relative's sense of this situation as a "family" problem may cause them to feel so personally involved that they get caught up in their own feelings about the affair. They may have their own very strong opinions about what the person should do and may feel even more justified in giving advice.

It's tempting to say, "*I think you should...*" or "*If it were me, I'd...*" But nobody knows what they would do unless and until it is them, so they shouldn't offer their opinions unless specifically asked. Since a person usually feels terribly weakened when they find out their mate has had an affair, they need to develop strength and confidence in their ability to cope with this situation—which doesn't happen by having someone else tell them what they should do.

For the friend or family member who wants to be helpful to a person struggling with their mate's affair (but doesn't know how), there are some simple things to keep in mind. First, they need to *ask* what the person needs. If they can't identify any big ways to be helpful, there are many small ways to make a difference. Frequently, a person needs help in coping with their daily responsibilities—shopping, baby-sitting, etc.—and any relief from these routine matters will be greatly appreciated. But, first and foremost (as mentioned earlier), the most important thing you can do is to simply "be there" for them so they know they're not alone.

What should I do about my father's affair?

Question:

I am the youngest child and the only one left living with my parents. I had suspected that my father was having an affair ever since I was young. Recently my mother was in the hospital for heart bypass surgery. I listen to my mother mention her doubts even in the position she is in. I finally decided to snoop, and I found out that he has indeed a mistress. My mother has no clue of what I know, and yet her instincts are so strong that she told me she wanted to tell him to leave. Now I have to put my life on hold or either take action fast and move out; however, what of my mother? I feel that I should let them fend for themselves, but I realize that maybe I would help her out of pity, but what will become of my life?

Peggy's Response:

This is a very complicated (but, unfortunately, not unusual) situation. As is clear from this letter, affairs affect a *lot* of people, not just those who are part of the typical "triangle" (husband, wife, and third party).

There is no "right" answer to the dilemma described above. There is no way to "protect" someone else from pain—regardless of whether the decision is to "tell" or "not to tell." Affairs inevitably bring problems, whether or not they are revealed. But the very fact that the mother has not directly asked the child about any knowledge of what's going on indicates a lack of absolute clarity as to whether she really wants to know.

There is often a lot of ambivalence in these kinds of situations, not only by the person in the mother's position, but by the person having an affair as well. So it's not just a question of whether to say something to the mother, it's even more important to consider "saying something to the father"—like telling him about "knowing" what's happening. It's appropriate to tell the father that while you're not planning to "volunteer" the information to the mother, you will not "lie" to protect him if she asks directly. This may lead him to consider what action he might take: either deciding to end the affair or to tell the mother himself. (It's always preferable for any "telling" to come from the spouse than from someone else, since this provides the greater possibility of being able to recover and perhaps even rebuild.)

While the child's life may be impacted in some significant way by whatever the parents do, the child can't "control" the situation—or "rescue" anyone from the consequences of whatever actions either parent might take.

I have personally felt the helplessness that can come from the realization that (as the child) you can't "fix" things. My own mother was a diabetic who was chronically ill for many years. While my father didn't have an affair, there were nevertheless significant problems in the relationship due to her physical condition. And while I desperately wanted to find a way to make a difference, a child can never either "fix" a relationship or "rescue" a parent from the consequences of a broken relationship.

The responsibility of children is to "be there" in spirit (as a sounding-board and moral support), *not* "be there" physically. So while it's the understandable reaction of a loving child to want to make everything all right, sacrificing their own lives for the sake of a parent is likely to fail to be a good solution for either parent or child.

The bottom line is that it is the parents' responsibility (separately and together) to "call the shots"—not the responsibility of the child. The child needs to take responsibility for their own life (and for being the best "person" they can be), which inevitably brings more pride and satisfaction to a loving mother than anything else they can do. So rather than wondering "what will become of my

life," the letter-writer needs to determine what steps to take toward responsibly deciding what will become of their life.

How can I get my family to accept my decision to stay?

Question:

My family has always been very close. So when they learned my hubby had cheated, they were very angry and now "hate" him. What can I do to help them accept my decision to stay and try to make the marriage work? And to accept my hubby again?

Peggy's Response:

The protective instinct of most parents leads them to want to "protect" their children (including adult children) from harm or pain of any kind. So being angry with someone who has hurt their child is a natural initial emotion for them to feel. However, one way to help them overcome their attitude is to make it clear that they are now causing you more pain by refusing to "accept your decision to stay and try to make the marriage work."

You can let them know that you need for them to "be there" for you, accepting and respecting your judgment and your decision—regardless of whether they disagree or fail to understand. And further, making it clear that you need them to *not* criticize or judge you or your husband as you make this effort. (I clearly remember telling some family members that I simply would not listen to them "running down" James or saying that they thought I should leave him.)

Even though parents think they have your best interests at heart—and even though their intentions are good—they need to understand that they're making things worse. It's important to help them understand how their "hate" for your husband is making your life even more difficult. In the most caring way possible, you need to help them understand that both you and your husband want and need their support. And their love for you needs to be strong enough to overcome their hate for him. (It might also help to point out that it's possible to "hate" what he did without "hating" him as a person.)

I included some comments about this general issue in *The Monogamy Myth*.

Here are a few excerpts:

A relative's sense of this situation as a "family" problem may cause them to feel so personally involved that they get caught up in their own feelings about the affair. They may have their own very strong opinions about what the person should do and may feel even more justified in giving advice...but friends or family members need to be very sensitive as to how their involvement might affect the situation.

There are...people who are...adamant in their opinion that the person who had an affair should not be forgiven and that the marriage should end immediately. People who hold this attitude feel very strongly that the person who had an affair should be punished. Unfortunately, this self-righteous attitude ignores the impact on the person who is to do the punishing. It's always easier for people to be arbitrary and rigid when they don't personally have to deal with the consequences. For the person who must make the decision, there is much to consider in deciding whether to stay or to leave.

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.

(end of excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*)

What about a spouse having an affair with a family member?

Question:

Please address the issue when a spouse has an affair with a family member, i.e. brother-in-law, sister-in-law, cousin. This is a unique circumstance and I have yet to see anyone address this issue.

Peggy's Response:

When the affair is with a family member, it certainly makes for a more complicated situation. Actually, I suspect this is not as unusual as we might think; I've known of about 10 or 12 specific instances involving family members. (In fact, one of the first affairs I ever heard about was 40 years ago when I discovered that my boss was having an affair with his wife's sister—when the wife didn't know, which was a *very* uncomfortable situation.)

Anyway, when something like this happens, it feels like a double-whammy. An affair with a friend involves some of the same feelings of being doubly hurt, but doesn't present quite as difficult a challenge in sorting through how to handle it.

Before discussing the various ways of handling it, I think it's important to consider how this could have happened. (It often feels so unbelievable that it makes things even more difficult.) First of all, the fact that an affair is with a close friend or family member reflects the fact that they weren't "out looking" for an affair. Affairs often evolve out of frequent contact (whether contact through the workplace, social contact, or contact within the family). People don't "intend" to have an affair; but they fail to maintain the appropriate boundaries that prevent it from happening.

As I've pointed out in the past, it's always preferable to sever all contact with the third party—and the only instances where that is usually not possible/reasonable is when the third party is a family member (or when there is a child from the affair). In those situations, it's much more of an individual matter where you have to weigh the pros and cons of all the different possibilities.

Of course, *none* of the alternative ways of handling this situation is likely to be attractive—which is what I call making a decision based on a "worst-first" assessment. (In other words, you go through the decision-making process by eliminating the *worst* way to deal with it, and continuing until you "back in" to whatever alternative is left.)

While this individual weighing of the pros and cons is the only way any specific person can decide, I will report what I've usually seen happen. In most cases, the hurt spouse "chooses"—either distancing themselves from the family member or distancing themselves from the spouse through divorce. Of course, it's not that they necessarily *wanted* to have to "choose." In some cases, they felt they worked through it and mended the relationships sufficiently to avoid having to choose—albeit with some very clear boundaries about interactions. Those who succeeded in doing this were those who insisted on getting everything out on the table—with the whole family, not trying to *pretend* or keep some family members "in the dark." (You really can't ignore this elephant in the room.)

Unfortunately, the biggest stumbling block to success is that sometimes the *rest of the family* couldn't/wouldn't deal with the reality of the situation and adjust to continuing to deal with everybody involved in light of this new awareness. In fact, this inability (or unwillingness) of the rest of the family to "step up to the plate" (even when the hurt spouse *did*) reminds me of a common situation where the family can't face up to and deal with a terminal illness even when the terminally ill person is willing and able to do so. Therefore, any person who wants to maintain *both* relationships (with the spouse and with the family member) needs to be very clear and assertive in instructing the rest of the family what they need, want, and *expect*. This doesn't mean trying to dictate the way they *feel*, but respectfully insisting that they *act* in a polite, civil way to everyone

involved. The strength of this kind of appeal is that they do this out of respect for you and your decision as to how to deal with this situation.

How do I cope when the affair is with my sister?

(I'm posting several letters related to affairs within the family before my response.)

Question #1:

I discovered my husband's affair quite innocently, about 6 months ago. What is so devastating is it was with my sister. I did find out there was/is a deep emotional attachment between them. Yes, I still love him, but I'm getting to the end of my emotional rope, and the fact that it was my sister has pretty much destroyed my relationship with her. HELP!

Question #2:

I am having a very difficult time trying to work through my husband's infidelity. He had an affair with my sister!! How do I get through this??

Question #3:

My husband told me in June he has been having an affair with my sister since May, After he told me we agree to work it out and I did all he said I hadn't in 14 years. In July he saw her again. Have there been many couples that have stayed together if this has happened?

Question #4:

Although there are other factors involved prior to this, my husband of 25 years had an affair with my sister. The emotional end has been going on for years, the physical part, to the best of my knowledge, occurred this past spring and summer. I stumbled across information in Aug. that alerted me to this. In all honesty I have also contributed to our marriage problems, and I know I have not been there for my husband emotionally these past several years because I was caught up in "ME".

Peggy's Response:

Understandably, the difficulty of dealing with a spouse's affair is compounded when it also involves another family member—like a sister. Some people may be shocked to hear of this kind of situation, but (like many aspects of affairs) this is not as unusual as one might think. In fact, the very first affair I ever knew about first-hand (over 40 years ago) was when my boss was having an affair with his wife's sister. It seemed unbelievable to me then, but in the intervening years I've known of many such situations.

While it in no way excuses this kind of affair, it's helpful to recognize that often affairs develop out of a connection that it built through ongoing close contact—whether through work, social life, or even family. Regardless of why it happens, the real challenge is to determine how it's possible to deal with this complex situation.

First of all, it's unreasonable to try to deal with it alone without the support of everyone affected. This means it can't be ignored or kept secret from others in the family. This is too big an issue to try to "go on as if nothing happened." But that doesn't mean it needs to be the only area of focus for the family. It simply means that everyone needs to face the reality that this has happened and be as sensible and responsible as possible in the way they talk about it.

Believe it or not, most people try to maintain the marriage and continue a relationship with their sister. Otherwise, they are terribly torn between their spouse and their sister. Whether or not this is possible depends in large part on the willingness of both the spouse and the sister to be willing to answer whatever questions a person wants to have answered. (Any continuing "secrets" between those two just perpetuates the problem and the pain.)

To understand more about why the willingness to talk is so important, see these two articles under the "Articles about Affairs" section of the website: "The Need to Know" and "Talking about Affairs."

One of the three primary factors involved in rebuilding the marriage is severing contact with the third party, an option that is closed if there is to be a continuation of both the marriage and the relationship with the sister. So the other two primary factors in recovery (answering questions and talking through the whole situation) become even more critical to recovery. See the article under the "Articles about Affairs" section of the website titled "How can you ever rebuild trust after an affair?"

It helps to know that it is possible to work through this with everyone involved—especially if you can get the cooperation of the whole family and are not trying to bear this burden alone. However, some people find it impossible to continue relationships with both their spouse and their sister. They feel they can deal with one, but not both. So they find themselves trying to choose between these two people as to who will continue to be a part of their lives. No particular decision will be without pain and difficulty—and any decision that a person makes is legitimate. Each person must decide for themselves since they are the ones who must live with the consequences of their decision.

How do I deal with the rest of the family?

(This is a problem for many—as reflected by the following questions:)

Question #1:

When telling parents of the betrayer what kind of reaction should one expect? What if the reaction is not conducive to reconciliation?

Question #2:

My wife was the betrayer in the relationship. We are on the road to recovery, however her parents have shown very little support towards me. In fact, they choose to feel that since my wife had her rebirth, and god forgives her that I need to forgive her to with no consequences for her actions. I really do not want them in our house if they believe that actions speak louder than words. What can I do to explain to them that forgiveness takes time.

Question #3:

If our marriage has a chance, how do we deal with the family knowing about my spouse's affairs. How does my spouse handle the immediate family. (knowing what he did)?

Question #4:

What is the best way to deal with family members who make excuses for the betraying spouse?

Question #5:

I am the betrayed spouse. My in-laws cannot believe why I still have issues with my spouse. They believe my spouse has made peace with god and feel that I have no choice but to get past this. One of my major hurdles is whether or not I really believe my spouse since they still have not made me feel safe. What can I say or do to let my spouse know how much this hurts me?

Question #6:

At that 2-year milestone, I am no longer angry with my husband but with everybody we know, especially those from my husband's professional circle. These people have known me for 21 years and have been part of his deception. If I try to educate anyone with your wise and experienced information, it seems they still believe I am in need of some kind of repair to keep my husband from wandering. Even my father thinks this. Whether or not I leave or stay, I am still angry with all of them. Advice?

Peggy's Response:

Most of the above questions focus on dealing with the family, with the last one addressing issues with family and colleagues who "knew" and still blame the hurt spouse. Frankly, neither friends nor family are likely to be helpful when they try to tell you what you should feel or do. What is needed from them is simply "being there" for you—respecting whatever *you* determine to be the best way for you to deal with your spouse's affair.

Part of their desire to have you just "get over it" is based on the preference (especially by those in the older generations) to simply "sweep problems under the rug" rather than deal with them. They have the mistaken notion that simply ignoring it will make it go away. But burying the issue doesn't make it go away, because it's "burying it alive," and it keeps coming back over and over from now on, until it's finally dealt with. Once an affair is exposed, everybody has to deal with facing up to the reality of what has happened. But those who love us (even with the best of intentions) can make things even more difficult.

When it comes to telling parents or other family members, there are some things that can make a difference in the way the information is received. It helps if both members of the couple do the telling together rather than having the one who had an affair "confess" it or having the spouse "expose" it. However, once the immediate emotional shock has subsided, the family needs to respect the individual's personal decisions about what to do long-term.

So it's important to help parents understand how their pressure impacts your own sense of yourself and your ability to cope. When a person find out their mate has had an affair, they usually feel terribly weakened and they need to develop strength and confidence in their ability to cope with this situation. This is made much more difficult when other family members are trying to tell them what they should do.

Here's an excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth* that addresses some of the issues in dealing with friends and family:

Unfortunately, even with the best of intentions, most people can't seem to resist the temptation to give advice. Typically, they say, "I think you should..." or "If it were me, I'd..." But nobody knows what they would do unless and until it is them, so they shouldn't offer their opinions unless specifically asked. A person usually feels terribly weakened when they find out their mate has had an affair, and they need to develop strength and confidence in their ability to cope with this situation, which doesn't happen by having someone else tell them what they should do.

Being given unsolicited advice...places an unnecessary burden on a person already overburdened; they may feel that if they reject the advice, it will put a strain on the friendship. A person may feel inclined to stop associating with friends who seem unable or unwilling to keep their opinions to themselves.

A relative's sense of this situation as a 'family' problem may cause them to feel so personally involved that they get caught up in their own feelings about the affair. They may have their own very strong opinions about what the person should do and may feel even more justified in giving advice.

One of the most important benefits of talking to family is simply that it helps most people break through the sense of isolation they feel at this time. When friends and family can simply 'be there' for those who need their support, this can play an important part in the healing process.

(end of excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*)

The bottom line: In the most caring way possible, you need to make it clear to your parents (and other friends and relatives) that since you are the one who must live with the consequences of whatever decisions you make about your recovery and rebuilding your marriage (or not), you are the one who needs to make the decisions without undue pressure or interference. And ask them to respect that fact by supporting your decisions—regardless of whether they disagree or fail to understand.

What about a "family affair!?"

Question #1:

My wife became involved with an extended member of her family. Although the affair has ended and my wife and I are still together, this third party attends family functions. Everything I have read states there must be a complete break from the third party in order to repair a relationship. This has proved difficult to do because of the family dynamics. Is it possible to heal from a "family affair"?

Question #2:

I don't know how to handle my husband's affair with my sister. It's been 18+ months since I discovered what was going on. As long as I don't talk about it or bring up, life is "tolerable." When I do, he becomes extremely defensive and basically refuses to answer my questions honestly.

Several times I told him the only way our marriage is going to heal and move forward is for him to sever all contact with her. No secret phonecards, post office box #'s, tracfones, payphones, etc.... I discovered the tracfone quite by accident and confronted my husband about it. He played "dumb" so well I almost believed him. He won't go to counseling because of the "frame of mind " he's in. He says the distance is because he doesn't know if I can ever forgive him. To be honest he hasn't given me any reassurance that I can trust and believe in him again. I love him so much, but I also don't want to waste my life away waiting for him to decide if he chose the right sister!!!

There's so much more to this situation, but I can only handle one issue at a time. I know this is lengthy. But I'm at my wits end with his attitude. Help.

Peggy's Response:

When the affair is with a member of the extended family (as in Question #1 above), it certainly makes for a more complicated situation. But it's not as unusual as you might think. Since familiarity and proximity (whether at work or in personal life) can gradually build stronger bonds than might otherwise happen, this can lead to problems for many people. (We certainly don't want to be alienated from family, friends or co-workers, but it's wise to be aware of this possibility in order to be alert to any feelings of being inappropriately drawn too close to someone else.)

Anyway, when something like this happens, it feels like a double-whammy. An affair with a friend involves some of the same feelings of being doubly hurt, but doesn't present quite as difficult a challenge in sorting through how to handle it. As I've said in the past, it is important to sever all contact with the third party—*except* in cases where the third party is a family member or there is a child from the affair. In those instances, it's a case-by-case situation with individual priorities to be assessed and individual decisions to be made.

(For circumstances where severing contact may still be essential, see the comments later in this response that specifically address Question 2 regarding the sister.)

While this individual weighing of the pros and cons is the only way any specific person can decide, I will report what I've usually seen happen. In some cases, they felt they worked through it and mended the relationships sufficiently to avoid having to choose—albeit with some very clear boundaries about interactions. Those who succeeded in doing this were those who insisted on getting everything out on the table—with the whole family, not trying to pretend or keep some family members "in the dark." You really can't ignore this elephant in the room. (And in some cases, the hurt spouse "chooses"—either distancing themselves from the family member or distancing themselves from the spouse through divorce. Of course, it's not that they necessarily wanted to have to "choose.")

When deciding to "get everything out on the table" and deal with it, the biggest stumbling block to success is that sometimes the rest of the family can't/won't deal with the reality of the situation and adjust to continuing to deal with everybody involved in light of this new awareness. Therefore, any person who wants to maintain both relationships (with the spouse and with the family member) needs to be very clear and assertive in instructing the rest of the family what they need, want, and expect. This doesn't mean trying to dictate the way they feel, but respectfully insisting that they act in a polite, civil way to everyone involved. The strength of this kind of appeal is that they do this out of respect for you and your decision as to how to deal with this situation.

Re: Question #2, when the affair is with a sister...

Understandably, the difficulty of dealing with this situation is even greater when it's a close family member—like a sister! While many people do try to maintain the marriage and continue a relationship with their sister, it's perfectly understandable and legitimate to still insist on the SPOUSE "severing all contact" with the sister because, as stated above, severing all contact is one of the important keys to rebuilding the marriage in any affair that does not involve family—and is still a completely legitimate preference even when it IS a family member.

One of the three primary factors involved in rebuilding the marriage is severing contact with the third party. For more on how this is critical to rebuilding trust, see the Article on my website titled: "How can you ever rebuild trust after an affair?"

Insisting that the spouse sever all contact with the sister may or may not include severing contact by someone in the position of the writer of the second question about contact with her own sister. Some people find it impossible to continue relationships with both their spouse and their sister. They feel they can deal with one, but not both. So they find themselves trying to choose between these two people as to who will continue to be a part of their lives. No particular decision will be without pain and difficulty—and any decision that a person makes is legitimate. Each person must decide for themselves since they are the ones who must live with the consequences of their decision.

The bottom line for the writer of Question #2 is that their questions and desires are reasonable. It's just terribly unfortunate (and frustrating) when the spouse is not willing to take the steps that would demonstrate they are taking responsibility for their actions. In fact, excuses (like not going to counseling because of a "frame of mind") is no excuse at all. Someone who has had an affair is much more likely to feel better about themselves if they change their "frame of mind" by facing what has happened and determining to do whatever they can to *earn* trust and forgiveness. (Both trust and forgiveness are by-products of behavior that warrants them—*not* something that can simply be "bestowed.")

In the meantime, of course, no one can *force* a spouse to be responsible. But at least the writer can have the peace of mind of knowing that their expectations and requests are reasonable—and determine not to be thrown off by the obvious efforts to "shut them up" by whatever means necessary.

While it may be wise to focus on just one issue at a time (such as severing contact with the sister), the refusal to answer questions is a *very* significant issue. So while the person who had an affair may use various tactics to prevent answering questions and talking through the whole issue, it simply does not "go away." In fact, the second and third keys to rebuilding trust (after "severing contact with the third party" mentioned above) are specifically these two steps: answering questions and talking through everything.

To understand more about why the willingness to talk is so important, see these two articles under the "Articles about Affairs" section of the website: "The Need to Know" and "Talking about Affairs."

Also, I repeatedly point to the results of my study where I surveyed 1,083 people whose spouses had affairs, showing that "answering questions and talking through the situation" are very strongly correlated with "recovering and rebuilding the marriage." See my "Overview of Report from Survey on Extramarital Affairs" posted on the website under my Articles about Affairs.

What about parents (or in-laws) causing problems?

(Last week's question focused on affairs within the family, so this week I've chosen some questions relating to the impact of family members' attitudes when the affairs are outside the family.)

Question #1:

My family only gave me a couple of months to "get over" my husband's affair. My husband also feels I have "dwelled" on it too much from the beginning and like my family, will not let me get emotional about it. He lost his job because of it, we filed bankruptcy, and I supported him for almost two years until he found a job...bottom line: My husband feels because I am outnumbered, I must be wrong. If I am so wrong, then how come it still hurts so much?

Question #2:

My husband had an affair a year and a half ago with one of my best friends. We have tried to move on yet his family can't. His sister is still friends with her and his parents welcome her into their home with open arms (yes they all know what happened). When she is at their home my husband stays away. Yet it makes me feel uncomfortable and I feel like they would prefer her to me. What do I do?

Question #3:

My husband's affair has ruined my relationship with my in-laws. They all said a lot of very hurtful things to me, basically especially his mother blames me for what he did and I simply cannot put it behind me. She lived through her entire marriage with my husband's father having affairs continuously throughout their marriage. It has been over 2 years since the affair and I simply do not want anything to do with any of them. They look at infidelity as a blip in the road map of married life.

Peggy's Response:

As the above questions illustrate, the fall-out from affairs affects others besides the couple involved; it creates issues for the rest of the family as well. Unfortunately, many family members don't handle their responsibility well. By that I mean that the primary role of family members is: "to support whatever the primary couple feel would be most beneficial to their recovery and rebuilding the marriage"—whether or not they personally agree/approve.

While it's understandable that family members may feel awkward, uncomfortable, even resentful of the fall-out in their own lives, a sign of caring is that they sacrifice their own comfort/preferences for those of the primary couple. A failure to do this means that (for the sake of the primary couple's ability to rebuild) they need to greatly limit their exposure to the family members who not only fail to be supportive, but actually "blame" you for the affair as in Question #3 above.

Frankly, the answer to the inquiry in Question #2 above: "*What do I do?*" is that there's really nothing you can do unless/until the family members are willing to be more thoughtful and respectful of your wishes. Of course, if you have failed to inform them (in a straightforward, yet not confrontive manner) just what you request of them, then their failure may be somewhat inadvertent. But once you clearly let them know what you would prefer (and they fail to respond), then, as I said, it's time to significantly limit not only your exposure to them, but your thinking about them. Just practice using your energy where you *can* have an impact (within your own relationship) rather than wasting energy fretting about what they're saying or doing.

Of course, it's especially frustrating when the spouse (as in Question #1 above) uses the family's opinion (that it's time for you to "get over" it after a couple of months) to bolster their own desire to avoid dealing with it. Unfortunately, that shows how little they understand about the nature of the

emotional impact of this experience. No matter how much you might *want* to "get over" it or genuinely *try* to "get over" it in a few months, it's simply impossible. As I have said many times, even in the best of circumstances it takes at least two years to truly "get over" the emotional impact of this experience.

The time frame is impacted by the fact that it takes a great deal of time to integrate this new reality of your life into your mind and heart. It's not as if it's *just* the affair itself (as if that weren't enough); it takes a long time because you're dealing with the fact that nothing about your life is as you thought it was: your spouse isn't who you thought they were; your marriage isn't what you thought it was; your *world* isn't what you thought it was! Thus the length of time needed to integrate all this new reality into your life.

So I encourage everyone who is facing difficulties because of the statements or actions of family members to constantly remind yourself that the important focus is on you and your spouse—not on the rest of the family. And you don't want to drain away valuable time and energy by worrying about family members that you really can't control. While it's unfortunate that an added loss from a spouse's affair may be the loss of certain family relationships, it's simply one of the many natural consequences of such a life-altering experience.

A good guide in dealing with situations like those described above is the Serenity Prayer:

"Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference."

An additional part of this piece, less-often quoted, says:

"Living one day at a time;
Enjoying one moment at a time;
Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace."

This is a reasonable path to follow at times like this.

Do I talk to his family about his affair?

Question:

My husband had an affair a couple of months ago and I am close to his family. Is it a bad idea to talk to his family members about the affair? I need people to talk to but I am afraid that if I get them involved I will have to deal with not only myself getting past the affair, but his family as well?

Peggy's Response:

Many people will be visiting with relatives during this holiday period, and it may be the first time being together "in person" since dealing with an affair. So I thought this was an appropriate time to focus on the general issue of "telling the family."

When it comes to telling parents or other family members, a great deal depends on the nature of your general relationship with them. But my general bias is toward more honesty and more disclosure rather than less. Some people have the mistaken notion that "not telling the family" means it will have no impact on your relationship with them. But an experience that is this significant is not something that can be withheld from those who love you without creating some distance.

Also, "keeping it our secret" is not something that anyone can completely guarantee will be possible. And if the family finds out at some point in the future, they not only have to deal with the facts at that time—but are also likely to be quite upset at not having been told earlier.

So it's always preferable to "work towards" telling. That does not mean you just blurt it out; there needs to be some careful planning and consideration for how they will be able to hear it and how they are likely to react to it.

Each couple needs to make their own decision as to when and how to handle this, but I'll offer a few ideas of what usually helps. There are some things that can make a difference in the way the information is received. For instance, you can set the "tone" by the way you show that *you* are dealing with it yourself. Also, it helps if both members of the couple do the telling together rather than having the one who had an affair "confess" it or having the spouse "expose" it.

However, regardless of how carefully you prepare, you can't fully anticipate the reactions. Everyone in the family has their own unique reaction to learning about an affair. Each one has to figure out how to deal with facing up to the reality of what has happened.

Some, especially those in older generations, may simply want to "sweep such problems under the rug" rather than deal with them. For instance, James's mother had no outward reaction to the news; however, she had a very strong internal reaction. In fact, she took it "personally" in that she felt somehow to "blame" that she had raised a son who could grow up to do this.

And one of James's sisters reacted by being quite critical and condemning of James—to the point of saying she thought I should leave him. Ironically, family members (even with the best of intentions) can make things even more difficult, so it's important to be well-prepared before telling the family. And if you are committed to working through this, it's important to let them know that you don't want them to undermine your commitment.

It's also important to help them understand that you want them to know, but you don't want or expect them to "take care of it" for you or tell you what to do. When a person finds out their mate has had an affair, they usually feel terribly weakened and they need to develop strength and confidence in their ability to cope with this situation. This is made much more difficult when other family members are trying to tell them how they should feel or what they should do.

Frankly, neither friends nor family are likely to be helpful when they try to tell you what you should feel or do. What is needed from them is simply "being there" for you—respecting whatever YOU determine to be the best way for you to deal with the affair.

Here's an excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth* that addresses some of the issues in dealing with the family and others close to you:

Unfortunately, even with the best of intentions, most people can't seem to resist the temptation to give advice. Typically, they say, "I think you should..." or "If it were me, I'd..." But nobody knows what they would do unless and until it is them, so they shouldn't offer their opinions unless specifically asked. A person usually feels terribly weakened when they find out their mate has had an affair, and they need to develop strength and confidence in their ability to cope with this situation, which doesn't happen by having someone else tell them what they should do.

Being given unsolicited advice...places an unnecessary burden on a person already overburdened; they may feel that if they reject the advice, it will put a strain on the friendship. A person may feel inclined to stop associating with friends who seem unable or unwilling to keep their opinions to themselves.

A relative's sense of this situation as a 'family' problem may cause them to feel so personally involved that they get caught up in their own feelings about the affair. They may have their own very strong opinions about what the person should do and may feel even more justified in giving advice.

One of the most important benefits of talking to family is simply that it helps most people break through the sense of isolation they feel at this time. When friends and family can simply 'be there' for those who need their support, this can play an important part in the healing process.

(end of excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*)

Severing contact when affair is with a family member?

Question:

I've read everywhere that contact with the affair-partner must be permanently ended in order to move forward with marital reconciliation. But I am a married woman having an affair with someone from my spouse's family. How could I ever cut off contact permanently? Even if we moved, there will still be years of holiday get-togethers, etc. What can I do? This difficulty has also contributed to my ambivalence about cutting off the relationship. I'm not sure that I want to. Any advice?

Peggy's Response:

First things first. The first step is to "permanently end the affair." (It sounds like the issues around "permanently ending contact" are being used as an excuse for continuing the affair.)

Then, when there is a clear and absolute end to the affair, the next step is to begin the process of moving toward telling your spouse about the affair. (More about this process later.)

Affairs seldom remain secret forever (even when they're not with someone in the family), and the chance of an affair in the family never being exposed is about like winning the lottery—not something any sensible person would count on.

So it's not a matter of preventing the spouse from learning the truth. It's a matter of when and how they will learn of the affair—and, more important, who is going to do the telling. If the truth is disclosed by you (as opposed to exposed by someone else), there's a much better chance of being able to work through it.

Of course, it's critical to make a decision as to whether or not you want to stay married. If you "don't know," then the decision may be made for you—if/when your affair is discovered. If you do want to stay married, the best chance of that happening is (as stated above) to first end the affair and then put all your efforts into preparing your spouse to hear the truth.

This preparation includes doing everything possible to allow the information to be heard in the spirit in which it's intended—hopefully because you respect your spouse's right to know and you want to rebuild the marriage. However, preparing your spouse to hear the truth requires that you begin by doing some important homework, to lay the groundwork for the telling.

The first step is to go through a careful, deliberate process of reinforcing the fact that you love your spouse, that you value your marriage, and that you want to do whatever it takes to have a good marriage. Only then are you fully prepared to take the next step and tell the truth. There is no clear time schedule for this process, but the sooner it is begun, the sooner the telling can take place—and the sooner there is a possibility that the affair won't be discovered some other way.

Once the spouse has been told, the couple need to decide together how to handle the situation with the family as a whole—which, of course, also involves how to handle any future contact with the former affair-partner. As I said in the beginning, focusing on the issues regarding "severing contact" is not the first order of business; it's the last, and it can only be determined in conjunction with the spouse.

I'll close by quoting from a previous Response that dealt with the issue of whether or not to tell the spouse:

"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. This means establishing a commitment to honesty and eliminating all secrets in order to eventually grow closer as a couple. So the bottom line is to gradually move toward telling."

Only then can you both work together to deal with the issues around severing contact with the affair-partner."

For more about this, see the articles on the website titled: "To tell or not to tell" and "Honesty!"

DEALING WITH FRIENDS

How do I deal with friends who knew?

Question:

What kind of relationships do you have with friends who knew of the affair and said nothing or supported it?

Peggy's Response:

This question apparently comes from the perspective of someone whose friends did not tell them about their partner's affair. While this certainly can create awkwardness about how to relate to them in the future, it can help to realize that in many ways the friends were (and are) in an awkward position as well.

As for the future, a lot depends on the nature of the friendship. For instance, we have several close friends who knew about my husband's affairs who are still close friends after all these years. I recognized that they were in a no-win situation—no matter what they might have done (whether telling me or helping cover for the affairs). While deciding *not* to tell may seem to indicate that friends "supported" the affair; that's not necessarily the case. In many instances, they're "caught between a rock and a hard place;" there's simply no clearly "right" way to handle this.

Since affairs are so prevalent, this is becoming a more common dilemma, and most people will at some point or another know about an affair and wonder whether/when/how to tell. "In general," the most responsible way to handle this is to adopt a form of the old "don't ask, don't tell" philosophy. But in this case, it means if the spouse from whom the affair is being hidden doesn't "ask," don't voluntarily "tell" them. But if they *do* ask, don't "lie." In other words, "Don't lie if you're asked, but don't volunteer the information if you're not asked." (This, of course, also involves telling the person having the affair that this is the "fair" position being taken.)

This may seem like a strange perspective coming from someone who is so much in favor of more honesty about this issue. But honesty needs to be "responsible honesty." For instance, if a spouse doesn't indicate any suspicion or ask any questions, it's often because they don't want to "know for sure." Often a spouse "knows" on some level, but isn't ready to face it. If this is the case, they should not be "forced" to confront it. My own experience is not unique in that I suspected, but tried to believe it wasn't true. I felt that if I knew for sure, I'd automatically have to get a divorce. (I think it's unlikely that I would still be married today if I had been forced to confront my husband's affairs before I was ready.)

So once an affair is out in the open, it's not reasonable to try to pretend it never happened, but it's also not reasonable to think all ties to those who knew about it must be severed. (It *is* important for ties to be severed with the third party, but not with others who "knew.") It's a matter of getting more understanding of the whole issue of affairs and recognizing the difficulty for everyone involved, including friends who know. In many ways, once an affair is exposed, everybody has to deal with facing up to the reality of what has happened—and hopefully using that experience to forge more honest relationships in the future.

Why didn't friends tell me?

Question:

I feel like such a fool. I've suspected his many affairs for years....My friends all knew. They saw my pain, (as did he) they offered everything but the answers I needed to know. No one said anything. They felt sorry for me. Now I'm alone. My husband still denies everything.

Peggy's Response:

It's understandable to be confused and pained that "No one said anything." But friends are in a very difficult position in this situation. No matter what they do, it's likely to be wrong—which is why they often do nothing. In situations like the above, the responsibility lies with the person who is suspicious to specifically "ask" the friends (in a very direct way) if they know about a partner's affair. It is *not* responsible for a friend to arbitrarily decide to "offer" this information without being asked.

The writer of the above letter doesn't clearly indicate whether or not she ever asked—only that the friends didn't tell her. If she asked and they lied, then her feelings toward the friends are warranted. However, if she didn't ask, then the friends' actions are quite understandable. In any case, everyone loses in these kinds of secretive, deceptive situations. And the responsibility for the pain created by the secrecy lies with the person who had an affair rather than with the friends who are "caught in the middle."

For the sake of the many people who will find themselves in the position of being a "friend" who knows (but doesn't know what to do about it), the *general* guideline that works best is:

"Don't lie if asked, but don't volunteer if *not* asked."

Part of this thinking is based on whether or not someone *wants* to know. Of course, when friends have a prior "agreement" that they want to be told if either of them ever learns about the other's partner having an affair, then it's responsible to honor that agreement. But when friends *don't* have such an understanding with each other, then it's important to consider whether someone really wants to know. (I know from my own experience that sometimes a person doesn't want to be forced to face something like this if they're not ready to deal with it.) So if they *don't* ask, it's usually better to wait for some indication that they want to know and are prepared to handle it. But if they *do* ask about their partner's affair, they're showing a readiness (or at least a willingness) to face it. So again, as a friend, it's important to honor their wishes.

Do I Tell my Friend?

Question:

I know for a fact that my friend's husband is having an affair. I'm not the only one who has seen him slipping around with this other woman when my friend is at work. I don't think she suspects. If she does, she hasn't let on to me. But I don't know whether I should tell her. What if I tell her and she doesn't believe me? Or what if I don't tell her, and then she blames me if she finds out some other way? Its killing me to stand by without doing anything. But I just don't know what to do.

Peggy's Response:

Obviously, this is a tough decision that needs to be made as responsibly as possible for the sake of everyone concerned. When friends don't already have an understanding with each other that they want to be told about a spouse's affair, it's important to consider whether the a person really wants to know. (I know from my own experience that sometimes a person doesn't want to be forced to face something like this if they're not ready to deal with it.) In other words, if a friend talks about being suspicious of an affair, they're showing a readiness (or at least a willingness) to face it. However, if they don't ask, it may be an indication that they either don't suspect, don't want to know, or are not yet prepared to handle it.

It's very difficult, of course, to simply "do nothing"—so in the meantime, it's reasonable to consider talking to the person having the affair to let them know that you know. This does not mean threatening or demanding, but simply telling them that you're aware of what's going on and that you won't lie to cover for them. This gives them the "opportunity" to tell their partner—or at least to end the affair. So in responsibly handling this dilemma, the most reasonable general guideline may be: "Don't lie to your friend if they ask, but don't volunteer the information if they don't."

How do you treat married friends dealing with an affair?

Question:

How do you treat married friends that are trying to repair a marriage after an affair? Some mutual friends won't allow the adulterer in their home. Others will support and socialize with the betrayed and the betrayer. Do you shun the betrayer, or try to help?

Peggy's Response:

The quick answer to this question is that you do whatever is wanted/asked by your friend (the *spouse* of the person who had an affair), putting their feelings above your own. While it's difficult for everyone (both the couple and all their friends), it's the *most* difficult for the spouse who is hurting but still "trying to repair the marriage."

Shunning the couple not only "punishes" the one who had an affair, but also punishes the innocent spouse—which appears to be taking a self-righteousness position "on principle" while ignoring the needs of the innocent friend who is already struggling and needs help and support.

Continuing social interactions with couples who are trying to deal with an affair does not indicate "approval" of the affair. And it doesn't mean "ignoring" the affair or "pretending it never happened." It's reasonable to acknowledge the reality of the situation with appropriate comments like: "How are you doing?" or "Is there anything I can do?"—but *not* injecting yourself into the situation by expressing your own personal criticism or advice.

Frankly, refusing to support someone's efforts to repair their marriage after an affair shows a lack of understanding of the complex factors involved in dealing with this issue. Many people assume that if *their* spouse had an affair, they'd immediately kick them out. They may say, "If it were me, I'd..." However, in reality, nobody has a clue what they would do unless and until it *is* them.

So if it's difficult to comprehend how a spouse could choose to try to repair their marriage, 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?"

Another factor to consider (related to shunning couples when there has been an affair) is that if the complete truth were known, you might have to shun a lot of friends. The prevalence of affairs means that most people regularly interact socially with couples where there have been affairs—they just don't know about it.

Finally, the way of thinking about affairs is impacted by the words used to talk about (and think about) this situation. Whenever the words used are like those in this question ("adulterer" and "betrayer"), you can be sure the attitude is one of being critical/judgmental/self-righteous—not one primarily of concern about the hurt spouse.

What do I do about affairs among friends or colleagues?

Question #1:

Everybody says they wouldn't tell a friend about her husband in an affair as to not ruin her marriage. I have survived the painful reality of my husband's affairs. Now I know of a friend whose husband is stepping out, and I can't find the wisdom in telling her. Even if she never finds out, I know first-hand that their relationship will suffer from the deception, and she'll have a feeling of craziness from what she doesn't know but senses anyway. Would you tell?

Question #2:

Before discovering my husband's affair, more than one year ago, I was non-judgmental and open-minded about other people's affairs. Now I have a fuller understanding of the emotional devastation and the long-term problems these affairs cause so many people. With my newfound sensitivity and knowledge about this issue, I am finding it very difficult dealing with co-workers, acquaintances and friends who are involved in affairs. What is my responsibility to others?

Peggy's Response:

As the above letters point out, affairs affect many people in many ways—not just those directly involved. In fact, here's an excerpt from my "Personal Note" at the beginning of my book, *The Monogamy Myth*.

The bottom line is that few people will avoid being personally touched by an affair. If not in your own relationship, you will almost certainly be affected through the experience of a friend or family member. Since you're unlikely to avoid this issue, you are wise to be prepared in advance by having as much understanding as possible. It's very difficult to think clearly if you wait until you're in the midst of trying to deal it.

Now, to focus specifically on Question #1 about whether or not to tell a friend that their spouse is having an affair... Here are some guidelines that can help people be better prepared to determine how to deal with this situation. (This is another excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*.)

Do You Ever Tell the Spouse?

There's a special challenge in appropriately handling the situation when the partner of a friend or relative is involved in an affair that has not yet been confronted. First, if the one having an affair doesn't know that you know, it's probably a good idea to inform them. This may have an effect on their thinking or their behavior, but the purpose is not to threaten or demand; it's simply to make them aware of your knowledge of the affair.

As far as whether or not you should share this information with your friend, it depends on your assessment of whether or not they would 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 at a time they may be unable to deal with it. It's important to know that someone wants the information before you give it to them. In other words, if your friend asks if you think their partner is having an affair, you probably shouldn't lie. By asking, they are showing a readiness (or at least a willingness) to face it.

However, if they don't ask, you should wait for some indication that they either suspect, want to know, or would be able to handle it. So the general rule might be 'don't lie, but don't volunteer.' In other words, if they ask, they're probably prepared to face it, so you shouldn't lie to them. But if they don't ask, it may be because they really don't want to deal with it yet, so you shouldn't volunteer the information. The best approach would be to help them become better

prepared, so that when they finally do confront it, they'll be able to deal with it in a way that allows them to survive the experience.

(end of excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*)

In addition to the issue of how to relate to friends, Question #2 raises another issue:

How do I deal with the fact that co-workers are having affairs?

I also addressed this in *The Monogamy Myth*:

One of the most prevalent instances is when people are expected to 'cover' for co-workers. For instance, secretaries invariably know a lot about the private lives of those for whom they work, and they are routinely called upon to help protect an affair. This can vary from a simple task like accepting collect phone calls from the third party (and always putting them through immediately) to altering expense reports that might expose the presence of the 'other' person.

People are often concerned that their job depends on doing as they are expected, and this is a realistic concern. So it's up to each individual to assess the situation for themselves to determine their degree of discomfort and to weigh these feelings against the practical concerns related to their career.

We need to face the reality of the prevalence of these situations and make a conscious decision as to how we plan to handle them. Being alert to the possibility of such circumstances makes it possible to avoid some of them. And when they can't be avoided, we need to be honest with ourselves in acknowledging that this is one of the many subtle ways we all cooperate in sustaining the code of secrecy.

(end of additional excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*)

NOTE: Most of the questions submitted for this column are about issues I have already addressed in *The Monogamy Myth*—which is why I so often quote from the book in my responses.

Choose my husband or others?

Question:

It has been a year. We moved 2 states away to work on us and see what our relationship could be. We seem to be doing well but the impact of the affair on friends and family and those relationships and included judgments are a problem. People have taken sides and my husband is uncomfortable with many old friends. I feel I need to take sides: choose my husband or others. I know life will never be the same, but the ripple effect is huge and painful.

Peggy's Response:

It is particularly frustrating when couples make a thoughtful, genuine effort to "work on us and see what our relationship could be"—and have that undermined by friends and family. Of course, while "taking sides" or being "judgmental" is not appropriate or wise, many people tend to react this way—primarily because of their own fear. They somehow feel that strongly condemning the behavior will somehow protect them from ever having to deal with this issue in their own marriages.

Unfortunately, this kind of short-sighted (self-centered) posture on the part of friends and family can lead someone like the writer of this question to feel that she must "take sides" as well—between her husband or others. However, the "others" have actually made this decision for her. *they* are the ones who have alienated themselves from the process of rebuilding the marriage, in essence forcing her to accept that they are cutting themselves off from the process. So she is not the one who is choosing this alienation; they are making this choice for her.

While everyone has the right to their own opinion (even if it's a short-sighted or self-righteous), they don't have the right to impose that opinion on a situation that they fail to understand. But even more important, regardless of their opinion of the one who had an affair, it's the "hurt spouse" who is suffering from their judgment—because the judgment is not just about the one who had the affair; it's also a negative judgment of the spouse for "staying." This is another major problem which I've written about in an Article posted on the website titled "Why does a person stay with a spouse who has had an affair?"

Frankly, it's very frustrating to see how many people just "condemn" affairs without considering any of the ways in which all of us actually contribute to affairs. It's always difficult to make this point because people want to simplistically assume that understanding the many factors involved in affairs is somehow "excusing" the responsibility of the one who had an affair.

But as I clearly point out in *The Monogamy Myth*:

Understanding the societal factors is not to excuse those who have affairs, but to relieve the sense of shame and inadequacy felt by their mates. Since they keep their shame and anger hidden, they seldom get enough perspective to completely recover from these feelings, regardless of whether they stay married or get a divorce. Surviving this experience if it has happened (or avoiding it if it hasn't) is best accomplished by dealing with reality, not holding on to a myth.

(end of excerpt from *The Monogamy Myth*)

Here's a list of some of the various "Societal Influences" that contribute to affairs:

Affairs are glamorized in movies, soap operas, romance novels, and TV shows of all kinds. Public disclosure of public figures having affairs is headline news because we are fascinated and titillated by hearing of others' affairs.

People are bombarded with images of women as sex objects in advertising and marketing campaigns. Over and over, the message to men is that the good life includes a parade of sexy women in their lives. Women inadvertently buy into this image and strive to achieve it.

The lack of good sex education and the existence of sexual taboos combine to make it difficult for most partners to talk honestly about sex.

As teenagers we get conditioned in deception when it comes to sex—engaging in sexual activity while hiding it from our parents.

The code of secrecy is a major factor in affairs because it provides protection for the person having affairs and leads them to believe they won't get caught.

So what can *you* do?

Parents: Need to raise children to be able to talk about sexual issues (*not* to think that "sex and secrecy" go hand in hand), thereby avoiding establishing a framework for life-long deception around sexual issues.

Couples dealing with affairs: Need to break the code of secrecy that makes it more difficult to get help and to recover. (If it feels "too awful to talk about" it's likely to feel "too awful to get over.")

Society in general (all of us): Need to focus less on the titillating and fascinating aspects (that actually support affairs) and more on honestly discussing the role we play in inadvertently perpetuating affairs.

CONCERNS ABOUT “OTHER PEOPLE”

How can I stop feeling like others think I'm foolish to stay?

Question:

How can I stop feeling like everybody thinks I'm an idiot for staying with him? Every time I say he is working I feel like they are thinking "yeah right, he is probably messing around." I hate the feeling.

Peggy's Response:

One way of dealing with concerns about others thinking you shouldn't stay is to remind yourself (over and over if necessary) just why you are staying. (It might help to re-read the article on the website titled "Why does a person stay with a spouse who has had an affair?") The more confident you are in your decision, the less you'll be concerned about what others think.

It's easy for people to judge others or to say something like "If it were me, I'd..."—but any statement they make as to what they would do can safely be ignored, since what people think they'd do in the abstract can become quite different in a concrete situation. While people often say they'd leave if their own spouse ever had an affair, the fact is that nobody has a clue what they would do unless and until it does happen to them. (As stated in the above Article, I'm NOT saying anyone "should" stay. I'm just saying that everyone needs to respect and support each person's individual choices—even when they disagree or fail to understand.)

Another way of dealing with your feelings is to realize that due to the prevalence of affairs, it's fair to guess that about half of those who think you're foolish to stay (and that your husband is "probably messing around") themselves have spouses who have had an affair; they just don't know it. So in many ways, your situation (where you know the score and have made an informed decision) is less to be "pitied" than those who don't even know about their own spouse.

Since you certainly don't wish for anyone else to go through what you're going through, you don't want to confront them with this perspective. But it can increase your own comfort in dealing with them to know that many of them are in a worse situation than yours—because they haven't even made an informed choice about staying in their marriages.

This kind of tactic (of thinking of others' spouses having affairs so you don't feel intimidated by them) is similar to the fearful public speaker who finds relief by thinking of the entire audience as being naked; anything that "levels the playing field" in your mind can help you deal with whatever fear/discomfort you feel in the presence of others who know about your situation.

Another way of understanding the potential judgments made by others is to realize that whatever their thoughts about you, it says more about their own fear/anxieties than about anything related to your situation. As discussed in the Article I referred to earlier: If we look closely at people who are upset about someone staying with a partner who has had affairs, we're likely to find a lot of fear—fear that it could happen to them—and a feeling that punishing people for affairs will somehow "protect" them from being faced with this problem in their own lives or in the lives of those close to them.

While none of us who has had this experience would consider ourselves fortunate, at least we now know that "The Emperor has no clothes" and are no longer pretending to see the finery that everyone else seems to think the Emperor is wearing. In other words, we have a wide-eyed view of

affairs rather than the uninformed attitudes held by so many who simply don't have much perspective on this issue.

What about total honesty with everyone?

Question:

Honesty? My wife has been honest with me about her affair. In leaving her job, she's lying about her reason to leave because she doesn't want anyone to know. This shows me that she is being dishonest with others. Is it ok to lie to her employer? Do you recommend total honesty in all aspects of your life?

Peggy's Response:

Many years ago I read an excellent interview with Sonia Nevis of the Gestalt Institute, and I completely agree with her way of expressing the general guidelines around honesty—when, why, and with whom. Here are some of her comments:

"Telling the truth is the work of intimacy. It is the vehicle by which intimacy develops. Intimacy, which is based on truth, takes a lot of time...and telling the truth is work. Intimate situations are possible only when the power is balanced. Only then can we afford to be vulnerable.

"While 'knowing and being known' is the essence of intimacy, it is important to know that I do not have to be known, that I do not have to tell the truth to anybody that asks it of me. There may be all kinds of complex reasons why we decide not to be known. So with respect to lying outside of an intimate relationship,...it is impossible to survive in a complicated society without lying, that in a range of situations various kinds of lying need to take place."

These comments by Sonia Nevis fit with the way I have often expressed the important of honesty. In intimate relationships, honesty involves more than just "not lying;" it also requires "not withholding relevant information." (And in a committed relationship, *anything* that might impact in any way on the partner or the relationship is "relevant.")

In most instances, this *general* definition fits when dealing with others outside of intimate relationships. For instance, "not volunteering" personal information at work is not "lying" and it's not even "withholding *relevant* information"—since private sexual behavior is not particularly relevant to doing a good job at work. (We saw this demonstrated—and recognized by the public—in the case of President Bill Clinton. Most people still gave him very high job approval ratings despite his private behavior.)

Should I tell the other man's wife?

Question:

My wife is in an affair with a married man. Because this is the big reason I am considering divorce, I would like to tell his wife that her husband is in the affair—because she seems to not know what is going on. My question is: Should I inform her about her husband and my wife or not? If I want to tell her, what is the best way to do so.

Peggy's Response:

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.

As for the last part of the initial question: *"If I want to tell her, what is the best way to do so?"*

As I have written before...any "telling" is best done when it is "disclosed" by the spouse who is having the affair—rather than being "exposed" someone else. (This give them a better chance of recovering—whether or not the marriage ends.) So 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.

Should the "other" spouse be told?

Question #1:

My husband had a 4-month affair with a married coworker. My question is should I tell her husband about the affair? Does he have a right to know?

Question #2:

My husband has confessed having multiple affairs, one being with a woman whose name I know. While it began before she married, in 1988, it continued sporadically till at least 2001, when she was married with 2 children. I believe she has had multiple affair partners. If her husband had found out first, I would want him to tell me. Do you think I should tell him? I worry about his risk for STDs.

Question #3:

My husband had an emotional affair for 11 years with one of his bowling partners who is also married. Should her husband be told? I discovered their affair about 1.5 years ago and never told her husband. My husband cut off ties with her immediately, but I feel like her hubby should be told sometimes. What do you think?

Question #4:

Why are women so often counseled not to tell the affected party that their significant other is having an affair? I can understand that the reason for telling and the delivery of the message should be appropriate, but if you truly know that a friend/acquaintance, family member's spouse or boyfriend is sleeping around, shouldn't you tell?

Peggy's Response:

This kind of question is submitted fairly often—usually by the spouse of someone who had an affair, wanting to tell the affair-partner's spouse as well, as is the case in the first 3 Questions above. (I also receive some inquiries like the one in Question 4 when it's an issue of telling a friend/acquaintance, family member.)

I have previously addressed the first situation—telling the spouse of the third party. Basically, as discussed in the previous response, there are 4 questions to be honestly considered: your motives, the nature of your relationship with the person to be told, your concern for the impact on *their* lives, and the likely impact on *your own* life which is likely to be negative. (For more about these 4 points, read the previous response above.)

As for telling a friend/acquaintance or family member:

Most people will at some point or another know about a relative or friend/acquaintance having an affair and wonder whether/when/how to tell. In general, the most responsible way to handle this is to adopt a form of the old "don't ask, don't tell" philosophy. But in this case, it means if the spouse from whom the affair is being hidden doesn't "ask," don't voluntarily "tell" them. But if they *do* ask, don't "lie." In other words, "Don't lie if you're asked, but don't volunteer the information if you're not asked."

(Obviously, if you had a prior agreement with your friend or family member that you would each tell the other if this ever happened, then you would honor that agreement, but most people don't have such a clear understanding. Casual comments don't count; it needs to have been a serious discussion with a clear agreement that they want to be told.)

However, you *do* say something to the person having the affair. In fact, it's important to let them know that you know about the affair and that you don't plan to initiate disclosing it (out of concern for the other person), but that you will not "cover" for them if you are asked about it. This gives them an opportunity to decide to tell their spouse themselves. Any telling is best done when it is "disclosed" by the spouse who is having the affair, rather than being "exposed" by someone else.

This may seem like a strange perspective coming from someone who is so much in favor of more honesty about this issue. But if a spouse doesn't indicate any suspicion or ask any questions, it's often because they don't *want* to "know for sure." Often a spouse "knows" on some level, but isn't ready to face it. If this is the case, they should not be forced to confront it. My own experience is not unique in that I suspected, but tried to believe it wasn't true. I felt that if I knew for sure, I'd automatically have to get a divorce. (I think it's unlikely that I would still be married today if I had been forced to confront my husband's affairs before I was ready.)

When the best man had sex at husband's bachelor party!?

Question:

My husband recently divulged that our best man (and his best friend) had sex with a hooker at my husband's bachelor party. I am good friends with his wife. I have a few issues here, first of all that my husband did not attempt to stop his friend, second that he (as well as the cheater's brother) watched him have sex with her, and thirdly, what do I do now with this info. I don't think I could ever face either of them again. Help.

Peggy's Response:

Many women are (legitimately) concerned about what happens at bachelor parties—because, unfortunately, the above-described situation is not uncommon. Since many women have heard stories about "wild bachelor parties," the whole issue of whether or not to have a bachelor party (and who will plan it and attend it) often creates a lot of tension between the bride and groom.

While I can't possibly know about the above situation, in most cases, the planners of a bachelor party who bring in a hooker do so with the hope/expectation of pressuring the "groom" to have sex with her (as a "last fling"). One way of controlling this is to include the father or brother of the *bride* among the guests at the bachelor party. (In fact, my husband and son did attend my son-in-law's bachelor party, although it did not require any intervention.)

With those general background/prevention-oriented comments, let me turn to the specific questions posed in this week's question:

Regarding neither the groom nor the best man's brother attempting to stop the best man:

It's hard for most women to imagine "standing by and doing nothing" in a situation like this. But many (most?) men would be unlikely to intervene to try to stop it. The "group pressure" is so great that the most they might do is to take their leave—or to discover in advance what will happen and not attend at all. (Of course, when you're the groom, you don't really have that option.)

So for starters, the bride needs to focus on the fact that not only did the groom *not* participate in the sexual activities at the bachelor party, but he even told her about the best man's behavior. (Many grooms would not have shared this information, specifically to avoid the kind of issues that are described in this question.) So it's important to stop and appreciate the honest communication—and not react in such a way as to send a message that makes the new husband think he can't share such information in the future.

Regarding what the bride might do with this information:

Any actions that are taken need to be discussed and agreed upon between the bride and groom. While the well-being of the friend (the best man's wife) is important, it's even more important to reinforce and sustain a relationship between the bride and groom that is based on honest communication. Otherwise, the bride might just as well tell the groom: "You can't tell me the truth about things that might upset me"—which may contribute to developing a pattern of dishonesty and deception in the marriage.

So the best effort is for the bride to honestly share with the groom the difficulty she feels in relating to this couple now that she has this information *and* imploring him to agree to at least tell the best man that she knows about it. But the bride needs to be sensitive to the awkward position this may present for the groom. He may be reluctant to let the best man know he has shared this with the bride because it breaks a kind of "male code" that men who are friends may expect of each other: that they will protect each other and "watch their back" if they get in trouble.

But the bride is not the only one who needs to be sensitive to the groom's predicament at this point. It's also important for the groom to be sensitive to the awkward position she is in by having to "pretend" all is well and trying to act natural around the other couple. So he needs to at least be willing to let the best man know that the bride knows about his behavior. (After all, it's the best man's behavior that has led to this problem, so he should bear some of the awkwardness that is a natural result of his actions.)

Once the best man knows she knows, it will no longer be just the bride who is concerned about "facing the other couple." The best man is likely to be concerned about couple-couple interactions as well—which is likely to change the dynamics of the overall relationships. This doesn't mean that the groom will be required to sever his independent friendship with his best man, but it does mean that the couple-couple relationship may either diminish or gradually be extinguished.

Regarding how the bride can ever face the other couple:

While it may seem impossible to reconcile the idea of continuing interactions with the other couple, I can personally vouch for the fact that this is possible. James and I did remain friends with a number of couples where the men (who were James's friends) had also had affairs but whose wives never learned about them. This is admittedly difficult, but not as difficult as the upheaval that would likely result from either "telling" or trying to break off contact with the other couples.

So we *did* continue to interact with the other couples—and, although the men knew that I knew about their affairs, I did *not* tell their wives. Of course, I was saddened by the secrecy that continued with the other couples, but I recognized that it was not my place to influence how (or whether) they proceeded with their marriage.

Many people think that if you know about something like this, you shouldn't "stand by" without telling the spouse who doesn't know. But unless friends already have a clear understanding with each other that they agree to tell each other if they learn of an affair, it's important to consider whether the person really wants to know. (I know from my own experience that sometimes a person doesn't want to be forced to face something like this if they're not ready to deal with it.)

So it's wiser to wait until/unless a friend talks about being suspicious of something like this or shows a readiness (or at least a willingness) to face it. However, if they don't ask, it may be an indication that they either don't suspect, don't want to know, or are not yet prepared to handle it. And if they don't want to face it, they may not believe it or they may end the marriage and blame you, etc. At the very least, it's likely to end the friendship.

It's very difficult, of course, to simply "do nothing"—so in the meantime, it's reasonable to let the person who has had a sexual experience outside the marriage know that you know. This does not mean threatening or demanding, but simply telling them that you're aware of what happened—and that you won't lie to cover for them. So the most reasonable general guideline may be: "Don't lie if asked, but don't volunteer the information if you're not asked."

However, as mentioned above, even this scenario would need to be agreed upon between the bride and groom. To take any actions (including severing contact with the other couple) without the agreement of the groom would almost certainly create serious problems. So the disappointment and discomfort with the information should not lead to damaging/destroying the trust between the bride and groom.

The Bottom Line: Protecting your own marriage:

While the specific issue of the best man's behavior is important, it in no way compares with the importance of safeguarding a continuing commitment to honest communication between the bride and groom. The higher priority is making it clear that ANY information can be shared between the

bride and groom without causing the one doing the sharing to "regret" their honesty and to inhibit them from being honest in the future about any issue that might create feelings of disappointment or discomfort.

Coping with all the Secrecy?

Question #1:

After 23 years in a very close and intimate marriage, I have found out that my husband has had multiple affairs. I am forced to suffer this great grief privately and I feel so bitter. When a friend's husband died recently, she received an outpouring of care and support. Of course she needed that, but in reality, my husband just died too, and I have to show up to every function in one piece when my entire being is ripping apart at the seams. I want to scream at the world, and I can't.

Question #2:

My husband had an affair with a co-worker. She and her husband live in our same small town. We all decided to stay in our marriages and not to disclose the affair due to work and home situations. Her husband now follows my husband anytime he sees him driving in the car around town. My husband and I have been doing fairly well. We did go to counseling but this has made it more difficult to heal. I feel like I am always waiting for the other shoe to drop! We did not disclose to our children.

Question #3:

It's been 1 year 4 months since I found out about my husband's affair with a co-worker. We are doing well and have been to counseling. He seems to be doing all the right things. The other woman lives in our small town. We were never close but we do have mutual friends and travel in some of the same social circles. We run into each other at our children's ballet classes etc. When I see her a rage builds in me. The affair is not common knowledge among our friends. How do I cope?

Peggy's Response:

While it's extremely difficult to cope with the impact of so much secrecy after an affair is discovered, the secrecy surrounding this issue has a negative impact in many ways. Here's a partial list of some of the effects of Secrecy:

- It adds to the excitement of having affairs.
- It leads those having affairs to assume they won't get caught.
- It leads those who suspect an affair to be alone with their anxiety.
- It leads those who learn of a partner's affair to be alone with their pain.
- It contributes to feelings of shame by the partner who did not have an affair.
- The secret creates emotional distance even if the affair is never discovered.
- It perpetuates the hypocrisy in society as a whole in that the secrecy allows us to pretend we're a monogamous society, leaving each couple to think they are unusual in failing to be monogamous—which makes recovery more difficult, whether or not they stay together.

Now, to specifically focus on the problems related to keeping this huge secret from friends/family/everyone...in many ways the secrecy can be more damaging than the affair itself. A person's self-esteem usually takes a beating when they learn of their partner's affair because they erroneously think it must somehow be their fault. So the first step is to get a deeper understanding of affairs and the fact that they are extremely prevalent and happen to all kinds of people in all walks of life. (Affairs happen to good people in good marriages—so there's no need to feel like this is just a personal reflection on you or your particular marriage.)

In fact, an important factor in rebuilding self-esteem is breaking through the isolation created by the secrecy. The first step is to honestly discuss this situation with just one other person and talk to

them about your feelings. Then you may be able to gradually broaden the discussion to include others who are important in your life.

Unfortunately, much of the focus on "keeping the secret" relates to not telling those closest to us—family and friends. But these are the very people who need to know. You can never be really close to them (and they can never be close to you) as long as this significant factor in your life is kept from them. If they truly love and care for you, they will understand and be supportive. If they're not, then it says more about them than about you.

Often, others are uncomfortable discussing this and uncertain what to say, but that doesn't mean it's good to avoid the issue. Something this significant can't completely be avoided; it's too dominant in your thinking—and in who you are as a person. And the people closest to you will never again really "know" you if this is kept hidden. Also, as I've mentioned before, secrets like this have a way of eventually coming out at times and in ways over which you have no control. So it's much better to have control over who, when, and how this information is shared.

Having said all this, I fully appreciate the difficulty in "Breaking the Code of Secrecy" about this experience. In my own situation, I spent 7 years in great pain, just suspecting—somehow knowing, but not really wanting to know for sure. So I hid it from absolutely everyone and suffered in silence. In fact, living with this kind of secrecy is a crazy-making way to live.

However, I'm not suggesting that people just suddenly decide to "tell all." It's important to lay the groundwork by preparing those you tell just what you want (and don't want) from them. Make it clear that you simply want them to know about this important aspect of your life experience so they can know you. Also, since most people don't know how to respond anyway, it helps to state that you're not looking for a particular response and are not looking for "advice." (Most people can't fully put themselves in your shoes, so any "advice" they offer is not likely to be very solid.)

You can encourage them to become more informed about the whole issue of affairs by reading some of the information I provide on the website, for instance, my Article about Affairs titled: "Affairs 101: My Overview of Affairs" and "Breaking the Code of Secrecy." Actually, I have written a great deal about this issue in the past—both in *The Monogamy Myth* and other articles.