

Extramarital Affairs: Therapeutic Understanding and Clinical Interventions

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Therapeutic understanding and clinical interventions in extramarital affairs are organized around the five phases of an affair: inception, pre-discovery, discovery, recovery, and resolution. This paper is designed to familiarize the counselor with common dynamics and issues in each of these stages of working through adultery. At the end of each of the five sections, therapeutic interventions (counseling techniques) are listed that the therapist can utilize to assist clients in their therapy process. The purpose of this article is to assist the marital therapist working with affairs to build skills in effectively resolving affairs and bringing healing to the marriage affected by adultery. Conclusions are that an affair can be a catalyst for growth, and counseling is vital for safely negotiating through to resolution of the affair. Future research needs to focus on how the Christian church can more effectively prevent adultery.

A man is actually married to two women and does not know what to do with the double bind he has created. He fears losing both of them. His legal contract is with his wife and two children; his emotional, one-flesh bonding is with his mistress. A young wife is curious and bored. She has only had sex with her husband and they are growing apart. An attractive colleague at work pays attention to her. She thinks it can be a safe, anonymous adventure. She does not count on the complications of dishonesty, guilt, and two men's feelings.

This is the material of soap operas, not a journal article. But we who do marital counseling are frequently faced with these dilemmas. My counseling practice includes about 40 to 50 couples a year who are working through affairs, and most of them are Christians. This seems tragic because extramarital affairs and God's design for a committed, intimate marriage are so deeply

opposed in their very essence: secrecy, betrayal, dishonesty, divided loyalties, and dangerous sex versus commitment, honesty, trust, a comfortable companionship, and sex that is safe and connecting. How sad that Satan, the father of lies, has made affairs seem common, nondestructive, and trivial.

Phases of an Affair

Counselors must remember how complex and multifaceted extramarital affairs are. The English word *adulterate* means to contaminate by adding a foreign substance—to water down and destroy exclusiveness. In this article extramarital affairs will be defined broadly. They can include emotional adultery that never culminates in physical sex, a one-nighter, or a long-term love affair. They may never be discovered by the mate, or they may be suspected and found out. The material will be organized around five common phases of an affair, with counseling

interventions that encourage healing: *inception, precovery, discovery, recovery, and resolution.*

The Inception Phase

Common misbeliefs. How do affairs get started? Whose fault are they? Are the causes usually sexual in nature? Can they occur even in a reasonably good marriage? Pittman (1989) discusses some of the common myths about infidelity in his book, *Private Lies*, and stresses the actual truth. In understanding the inception of adultery it is important to explore and challenge some of these false beliefs.

1. Misbelief Everybody has affairs. Truth: Infidelity is not normal behavior, but a symptom of some problem.
2. Misbelief Affairs are good for marriage. Truth: Affairs are dangerous and can easily, and inadvertently, end marriages.
3. Misbelief Affairs prove that love has gone from the marriage. Truth: Affairs can occur in marriages that, prior to the affair, were quite good.
4. Misbelief The affairer was sexier than the spouse. Truth: Affairs involve sex, but the sex is not usually the purpose of the affair.
5. Misbelief The affair is the fault of the cuckold [one cheated on]. Truth: No one can drive someone else to have an affair.
6. Misbelief: There is safety in ignorance of a spouse's affair. Truth: Affairs are fueled by secrecy and threatened by exposure.
7. Misbelief: After an affair, divorce is inevitable. Truth: Marriages can, with effort, survive affairs if the affairs are exposed.

Genesis of an affair. A physician came for counseling after falling into infidelity with a nurse at his hospital. He was motivated by curiosity and the excitement of having illicit sex with someone new. He had been a virgin when he married and had expe-

rienced sex only with his wife. He was so disappointed to discover that "tissue was tissue." There he was having intercourse with someone new and realizing that this was not really that different from his wife.

The reasons affairs begin demonstrate the complexity of this topic. Like the above illustration, they can happen in decent marriages out of curiosity and a friendship that is romanticized over time. They may be mostly sexual, or they may involve trying to get nonsexual needs (affirmation, sympathetic listening, adventure) met in a romantic relationship. One wife met a neighbor at a block party and he seemed to listen to her and make her feel special—so much more than her husband. A genuine friendship developed that ended in an affair with many boundaries violated.

Affairs can be symptomatic of midlife crisis or marital dissatisfaction. They can be used for revenge, to end a marriage, or may be a part of personal problems like addiction. Sometimes they are a way of distancing intimacy and keeping a marriage shallow or living out the patterns of the family of origin. Many have never learned monogamy in dating relationships and carry this on into marriage.

People are never blindsided by an affair. Many choices are made and situations allowed to develop before the affair begins. Many salespeople and those who travel will state that they did not plan any adultery and were blindsided by bad circumstances. But even the one-night stand has many points of intervention before its inception. Why was the person vulnerable away from home? What was he or she doing in the bar anyway? How did the conversation get struck up? How did they end up in the hotel room? A person does not become a victim of the great compromise completely unwittingly.

Therapeutic interventions involving the inception phase.

1. An important part of healing adultery is exploring the beginning motivations and understanding what created the fertile ground for that type of affair, emotional or otherwise. This can be an important part of prevention. For the cheated on: They want so desperately to understand the rea-

sons, to make sense of the craziness of betrayal. Therapy must acknowledge that none of the reasons will be adequate for them. He or she seldom would have committed adultery for those same reasons. One wife stated that she could understand a brain tumor—but curiosity! Even inadequate reasons are helpful though in helping them understand their mates' fallibility.

2. For the betrayed: It is also important, when going over in therapy this inception phase, to dispute reasons that are inaccurate such as, "If he really loved me he wouldn't have cheated," or, "It must be that I am unattractive and inadequate." Affairs are something that will be taken personally and positive self-talk must replace negative messages. "I am attractive and lovable." "Our marriage had many good qualities and we can rebuild."
3. Clients can be led to truly examine the consequences of affairs. This will be covered more under the discovery phase. They must sadly comprehend what terrible consequences are paid for giving in to curiosity and sexualizing friendships. They must mourn the loss of intimacy and trust. They must face the cruelty and insensitivity of their actions.
4. Help clients think through what might be a continued chink in their armor that Satan could exploit: What type of person and situation would be most seductive? Never allow complacency. It is important to stress that the mate who was cheated on is also very vulnerable, and it would be tragic if the next affair was his or hers. Throughout the therapy, keep teaching clients important skills and values: being vigilant, constantly repairing marital fences, maintaining close same-sex and couple friendships who also value fidelity, never keeping secrets, disciplining sexual thought life, and growing ever more close to Christ and his wisdom. These are invaluable in helping people to not be vulnerable to the inception of another affair.

The Prediscovery Phase

As the adulterous relationship comes into full bloom, there is a lot of guilt, excitement, stolen pleasures, much phone time, dishonesty and webs of deceit, and often not that much sex. Each rendezvous takes planning and deception with more carelessness over time. (Some adultery involves a one-night stand, and there isn't a prediscovery phase. This is not to say that this type of affair is not destructive in similar ways.)

Prediscovery irrationality and crazy-making behavior. Distance increases and the one cheated on often knows something is not quite right but cannot put a finger on it: There are new outfits and hairdos, wanting to be out late at night with friends, different cologne and music, hiding the VISA and mobile phone bills, and being late for appointments. Showing neglect and then being solicitous for no particular reason make the marriage perpetually confusing.

Feelings oscillate from confused hope to fearful desperation in the one cheated-on and from guilty excitement to self-loathing in the cheating partner. Sometimes at this point, the confused and cheated on partner initiates therapy. This usually does not go anywhere, with the therapist caught up in the lies and incomplete picture, or confronting the possibility of adultery. Sometimes the confrontation precipitates a confession, and the discovery stage is entered. Frequently it draws a denial and therapy fizzles out.

The one in the affair is often oblivious to the changes taking place and does not see the deteriorating marriage and the rationalizing: one's partner is becoming less attractive, the tension is somehow the mate's fault, he or she doesn't understand one anymore. As the fog increases, it is difficult for the cheating partner to see his or her mate's credit column and strong points. They wonder why they married, and the affairee becomes idealized.

Carter (1990) in his book, *The Prodigal Spouse*, talks about this self-deception, "If sin can be explained away, then it can be seen as less deadly than it is. However, true healing requires a total admission of wrong" (p.158). Dr. Carter goes on to list some of the common statements that mates often give as they shift the blame, selfishly cater to their

own needs, ignore deeper truth, and abandon the quest to create real intimacy in their marriage: "Stress was getting to me and I slipped; I've fallen in love with someone else; If I pass up this relationship, I might not find ever find one as good again; God's grace will cover me" (pp. 159-171).

The prediscovery stage is a time of craziness for both partners. As evidence builds, the adultery is usually discovered. Sometimes an affair is suspected but never admitted or proved and the unfaithful mate ends it before definite discovery. Sometimes the affair is so well hidden that one partner does not know. This can make that mate feel very stupid and duped when the truth comes out.

The undiscovered affair and confession. A real predicament for counselors is the undiscovered affair. Some observations:

1. An issue most people struggle with is the advisability of confessing undiscovered affairs, both past and present. Confession is vital in restoring honesty and rebuilding trust and a unique partnership. It breaks the power of secrecy and helps the guilty one feel accepted and forgiven, in spite of what he or she has done. An ongoing or recent affair usually demands a thorough confession to one's mate as well as to God and his representative for healing to begin to take place and honest intimacy to be reclaimed.
2. The confession of past affairs is more difficult to determine. One client confessed in therapy to a one-nighter four years earlier, while on the road as a salesman. In sorting through, he had already recommitted to the marriage and sought God's forgiveness, but had never told anyone. These are difficult situations that need prayer and rational thinking as to why the affair should not be confessed. Good reasons not to confess include the following: confession may destroy a mate's already damaged ability to trust, may displace guilt, or may dig up old garbage when the marriage has truly been healed. Inadequate reasons for not confessing might include: avoiding conflict, thinking

one's mate is fragile or should never be hurt, and believing confession is not that crucial.

3. Many affairs go undiscovered and never get to the discovery and resolving stages. Two things happen: (a) The individual issues and flaws in the marriage are never dealt with and often there is another affair or the partners settle for an unsatisfying relationship; (b) Mistrust and dishonesty linger because the mate suspects the affair or trust has been breached, and a deeper intimacy never blossoms. Adultery creates hairline cracks that can eventually threaten everything. Unfortunately, affairs sometimes don't hurt a marriage because it never was intimate.

Therapeutic interventions involving the prediscovery phase.

1. In marital therapy it is good to be aware of the signs of an undiscovered affair. Signs can be marital therapy that is going nowhere, one mate who refuses to work on the marriage and allow the mate to make changes, unaccounted time and behaviors, or an infrequent sex life. It can also be listening to the mate who suspects an affair and helping to evaluate the evidence. If confrontation ("You may not trust me enough to be honest, but are you having an affair. Here is why I am suspicious...") goes nowhere, encourage the possibly cheated-on mate to do detective work. The therapist does not want to create paranoia, but if there is an affair, therapy and the marriage will stay stuck.
2. When processing the prediscovery phase, it is important to help the one cheated on to deal with his or her feelings: (a) of being crazy, (b) of being duped. Spouses in this position sometimes don't trust their own judgment anymore. They have been lied to continually and everything has become so irrational. Help them to understand that their reality was challenged because of lies and lack of information. Their opinions and judgments actually were not wrong much of the time. They also feel terrible about being duped. This may include anger about the length of the affair or about particular

acts of betrayal. Encourage them to express their anger and embarrassment and truly forgive themselves as well as their mates for being made a fool.

3. Shame is so important to process and resolve in both mates. Those cheated on feel shameful about being suckered and victimized. Cheaters wonder how they could have lost their integrity when they are usually people of integrity. How could they have been so cruel and dishonest? Confessing the shame and processing it is the place to start. Then begin working on forgiveness.
4. The therapist will need to guide the confession process as the adulterer informs his or her mate of what transpired in this prediscovery phase. This will be discussed more in the next phase, but the goal is healing and not creating further nightmares. Slowly guide the confession in the direction of process questions and not detail.
5. Help counselees who are confessing an undiscovered affair in your office to thoroughly process with shameful details included. If they have had six affairs, then carefully go over each one in detail. It must be processed in a detailed way that prevents vulnerability to future affairs with attention paid to stupid choices, failures, and why each occurred. This emphasis on a complete confession is important in helping the confessor feel clean, honest, and forgiven. Discuss the appropriateness of telling their mates or going to their pastor for confession (if you are not their pastor). Many counselees desire to be but do not truly feel forgiven unless they have straightened out their relationships with God and felt his forgiveness. They will need to confess to a clergy person of their choice to accomplish this.
6. Never underestimate the power of a love affair. Help the client be aware of the danger of relapse, even though it has been discovered and a decision made to save the marriage. A therapist should count on

relapse. This will be discussed more in the recovery section.

The Discovery Phase

A profusion of feelings, issues, and reactions must be worked through during this time of discovery. How the affair was discovered doesn't seem to cushion the shock for the partner. It is devastating whether it is confessed, discovered via taped phone conversations or a private detective, or found out through a growing collection of evidence and a confrontation. It is all so tawdry and gut wrenching and throws both mates into feelings of pain, guilt, betrayal, and deep loss. Choices have to be made and grieving begins.

The process of grieving. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross (1969) and other psychological researchers have demonstrated that there are various stages and feelings people go through when they are grieving a loss. Grieving is a vital part of the discovery and recovery phases because multiple losses have been incurred by both marital partners in an affair: respect, the marriage as it was, self-esteem, commitment, dreams and expectations, innocence, and trust.

The first reaction in grieving is usually shock and denial that this could really be happening. Later stages and reactions in the grieving process include anger in many manifestations, intense and wildly fluctuating emotions and tears, depression, feeling duped, bargaining and interrogation, confrontation, and many flashbacks and fears. All stages and feelings have to be experienced and worked through before healing can occur and the adultery be resolved. Therapy can accelerate this process.

Metaphors for promoting confession and personal responsibility. Adultery is like a death: you need to view the body. Mates need a thorough, honest confession (viewing the body) to validate that a real loss has taken place; then they can slowly grieve and reclaim the marriage. In Alcoholics Anonymous there are 12 steps that recovering alcoholics go through in order to promote healing. The fourth step is a thorough and fearless moral inventory in which they courageously write down all their past transgressions and then confess them to at least one person.

Harvey (1995) lists fair questions in this first, thorough confession. With whom did you have an affair? How and when did you meet? Who else knew of your relationship? How many times did you have sex? Where did you have sex? Did you ever have sex in our house or bed? Has the relationship been severed? How do you feel about him/her now? Has there ever been anyone else? Is there anything else that I should know? (Harvey, 1995, pp. 113-114).

Clients often want to make this confession in the therapist's presence so there can be a buffer. This initial confession is best done outside the therapist's office. It is a painful, private, and intimate experience that is more effective for both partners to work though alone together. Unfortunately, the cheating partner often gives out the confession in dribbles of information and keeps hurting trust with each new revelation. This is where the therapist can be helpful in encouraging a true viewing of the body.

Lies and rationalizations are the bedrock of adultery. One husband shared how he had daydreamed about that un-dangerous liaison—that enriching and helpful affair. One wife stated she did not think her affair was as destructive because she never took off all of her clothes. Another husband believed he had maintained his integrity by keeping his wedding ring on at all times when he was with his mistress.

Sometimes adulterers have a difficult time taking personal responsibility and want to blame their partners for their shortcomings. A metaphor that works very well is the concept of stealing a car. Even if a person leaves the doors unlocked or leaves the key in the car, the thief is still responsible for stealing the car. Both partners must take a look at themselves, but the cheated-on mate did not cause the "theft." The adulterer chose to steal the car, have the affair. One angry wife exclaimed, "I don't care if I left the doors unlocked, the key in the car, and the dome light on—you still stole the car!"

After a thorough confession, the goal is to help counselees progress to *process* questions and not *detail* questions. A couple needs to view the body, but eventually it can become ineffective if they keep digging it up to do endless autopsy with "detail" ques-

tions. Process questions are those that deal with what was missing both personally and in the relationship that led to the affair or how to heal now. How did the love for someone else grow? What needs to change? How could he help her trust more? Detail questions—when, where, how many times, what positions—create vivid nightmares and are counterproductive as the imagination runs wild.

Importance of interrogation and questions. The betrayed mate feels the need for 100 questions. The one who has committed adultery grows weary and is ready to move on, but therapists need to encourage some questions, while monitoring their detail orientation. The interrogation is important for the cheated-on spouse:

1. to break through the shock and denial and ventilate some anger as the grieving process is worked through;
2. to prevent with enough questions and knowledge another affair from happening;
3. to break the bonds and completely reclaim the mate by destroying all secrets and having everything in the relationship mutually shared knowledge once again;
4. to exact some penance and perhaps some vengeance as the partner squirms and atones for the feelings of pain and being duped that the cheated one feels.

After the discovery of adultery, most couples go through many turbulent feelings. They have to slowly progress beyond shock and denial into the following grief work of anger, tears, depression, interrogation, and working through to acceptance and healing. Both partners often feel definite relief to have broken the oppressing pattern of secrecy.

The discovery phase is not always neat and the cheater can struggle with ending the affair and may want to keep the affair on hold while he explores whether the marriage can be rebuilt. Dobson's book (1983), *Love Must Be Tough* states so well the need of the cheated-on spouse to maintain self-respect

and demand a choice while giving the partner the freedom to leave. There may be relapses and further interactions, but the discovery phase must begin a tough, willful, and cold-turkey (additional good-byes accomplish nothing) journey of grieving and letting go of all thoughts, feelings, and contact with the other person.

Intense anger and new outbursts of feelings and questions are occasionally triggered and the adulterer may be awakened in the middle of the night or receive a barrage over the phone or the minute he or she walks in the door. A wrong number, a new sexual technique, 20 extra minutes getting home at night and the angry attacking begins all over again. Trust is gone and the affair has been a catalyst to point out flaws in the marriage that must be addressed. The one cheated on feels so stupid and gullible and can create nightmares imagining all that went on.

Damaged goods syndrome. Husbands whose wives have committed adultery must guard against treating their wives as damaged goods. Husbands are more likely, but wives too can be guilty of this false thinking. He may feel that somehow her body (his possession) has been forever tainted by her lover's presence. It sometimes helps to state that the vagina is self-cleansing and there is no presence of a lover. Gently remind the couple that it is not the physical act of intercourse that is the ultimate betrayal, but rather the breaking of the covenant relationship and the emotional involvement. Healing is a tortuous process for both mates.

Therapeutic interventions involving the discovery phase.

1. Help the clients grieve and work through the anger and hurt. Sometimes it is better to do this individually, not jointly. There are so many losses that must be mourned. Often the adultery happened in a decent marriage and the mate has fallen off his or her pedestal. It can be helpful to process that innocent trust is gone forever, but that God can help build an even stronger marriage if they choose to heal. Assist them to restore more realistic trust and respect as healing takes place.

2. Guide a thorough confession so that it

does not come in dribbles and further damage trust. Gently head the questions in a more process and healing direction and away from details. Remember that some detail questions will continue, and the adulterer can often answer briefly and then go into restoration: "Yes, we went to our favorite restaurant. I love you and am so sorry for this continued pain. Let me hold you."

3. The mate who has been cheated on always wants reassurance that the partner will never have another affair. There are many things couples can do to set better boundaries and prevent future tragedies. These can be gone over in counseling sessions.

(a) Nurture a rational, willful *decision* that extramarital affairs are deeply destructive and *never* an option. No circumstance or need or rationalization will ever make adultery right or appealing. The answer to the question of having an affair is not, "I don't think so," but, "never."

(b) Do not keep secrets and allow sexual feelings and fantasies to go unaddressed. Infidelity is based upon dishonesty. Bring all secrets to the light and evaporate the sexual power while preventing irrational, destructive actions.

(c) Keep all sexual fantasies that are willfully (intentionally) created *focused on one's partner*. Christ said that if a person "continually lusts" (Matt. 5:28) that sin will follow. One's sexual thought life must be disciplined. (One man who went to many academic conferences built a fantasy in which he met a sexy woman who seduced him in his hotel room. You can guess the sad outcome of that story.)

(d) Set limits in casual relationships. Do not share intimate details of one's marriage with an opposite-sex person or air dirty laundry to a stranger, at work, or in a church group. Do not spend unaccounted-for time together with opposite-sex colleagues, committee members, schoolmates, or exercise partners. Mention one's mate positively, refrain from long eye contact, avoid

intimate settings (riding alone in your car), and include the whole group. These limits may seem arbitrary to counselees, but affairs often start with a casual acquaintance and develop from there.

(e) Do not permit an intimate friendship with an opposite-sex person to grow without *tight boundaries*. Intimate friendships are even more dangerous than casual ones. Boundaries can include: My mate is included in all activities, sexual attraction will end the friendship until it is dealt with, no secret letters or phone calls, do not play therapist with bonding sessions over personal woes, sexual talking and joking will be monitored for inappropriateness, and there will be modesty in clothing especially on beach vacations.

(f) Explicitly state and understand what is and is not appropriate behavior, and have healthy jealousy. One salesman never sees clients on the road after seven P.M. A homemaker never allows male neighbors into the house unless her husband is home.

(g) Pay attention to pricks of conscience and nondefensively heed confrontation around possible violations. People seldom are blindsided by an affair, but they ignore warning signals. An ounce of prevention can be worth a pound of cure.

(h) Build an individual and corporate love relationship with the Lord and Creator. Allow God to break the power of sin and guide into truth.

4. Gently and carefully work with the mate who was cheated on to recognize his or her part in the affair. It is a fine line between blaming him or her for stealing the car and reminding him or her that he or she did leave the car unlocked. Marital issues like lovemaking; connecting conversation and time together, paying attention, admiration, and respect must be explored and changes made.
5. Prescribe some reasonable restitution for the mate who has been unfaithful. One important part of this is that the mate who

cheated must be patient and answer questions and give time for healing. He or she will be ready to move on much sooner. On the other hand, deal with the concept of damaged goods. The adulterer cannot be hammered forever. As Christians, they can both reasonably expect forgiveness.

6. It is also so vital to teach the crucial Christian skills for healing when intimate relationships are violated: confrontation, repentance, confession, grieving and expressing feelings, forgiveness, and making amends. The couple will need to learn communication skills and acquire the ability to resolve conflict. Repentance means renewing one's mind and making true changes. Teach forgiveness as being a process and the ultimate need to truly pardon, much as a governor pardons a criminal and wipes the ledger clean. Remind the couple that forgiveness is different from trust, which must be rebuilt, and that letting go takes time.

The Recovery Phase

Joy (1986) calls adultery "double bonding" and relates what a very destructive and schizophrenic task this is to try to accomplish. Affairs are so much more than sexual infidelity. In the recovery stage, mates struggle to unbind and rebond and come to grips with the fact that their marriage had much more glue and uniqueness than just sexual faithfulness. They especially need to focus on shoring up the emotional and spiritual dimension of their companionship during this recovery process.

Assisting the process of recovery. The interrogation slowly lessens and the one cheated on tries to keep the questions more process and not detail in nature. Sometimes the adulterer needs to make a simple answer to a detail question (I.e., Did you take her to our favorite restaurant?) to lay an issue to rest. Both mates wonder if the mistrust and flashbacks will ever stop and trust will ever be rebuilt. For the adulterer, answering questions and reassuring is part of the penance and price he or she is paying to restore intimacy and heal the damage that was done.

Virkler (1992) gives some important advice about what not to do during this

recovery period. Don't let the present crisis destroy a broader perspective of the marriage. Be careful whom you confess to and don't tell more people than absolutely necessary. Don't become hostile without processing why. Don't issue ultimatums or try superficial solutions that can actually damage the marriage. Don't play games, manipulate, or retaliate (pp. 173-180).

Making amends. It is not unusual to encounter a need for vengeance or restitution after an affair. One husband told his wife that since she had had an affair, he was going to sleep with five different women one time or with one other woman five times. As his therapist, I am not sure why the number five stuck in his mind, and somehow five women seemed more destructive. Nevertheless, those were his conditions. Others will assign their mates the tasks they hate to do: "You can unload the dishwasher and scrub the toilets the rest of our marriage."

Actually, making amends or restitution is a scriptural idea. After his conversion, Zacchaeus stated that he would pay back four times the amount to anyone he had cheated as a tax collector and Christ saw true penance and repentance in this act (Luke 19:8). Ezekiel 33:14-16 encourages that if a person "turns away from his sin and does what is just and right... returns what he has stolen, follows the decrees that give life, and does no evil, he will surely live." An adulterer has stolen intimacy and commitment from his or her partner. Restitution in kind seems appropriate, not only to heal what has been damaged but also to help that person grow through penitence and making some real changes. This does not mean vengeance or destructiverestitution like five affairs, but rather that time, money, and energy be invested in rebuilding the marital intimacy that has been so damaged by the adultery.

In recovery, the one involved in the affair is usually ready to move on long before the wounded partner is able to. Both can grow weary in the processes of grieving, rebuilding intimacy, and forgiving. The initial choice of forgiveness on both partners' part may be made quickly, but the process of forgiving and letting go and rebuilding respect and trust takes time.

Forgiving is not condoning or hurt has been done or instantly forgetting. A male client stated in a therapy session, "She has forgiven me. I don't know why she can't forget and trust me again." This was said after two weeks had elapsed since the discovery of his second affair. Partners don't forgive and immediately forget—they slowly let go as trust is *earned*.

Prognosis in the recovery process. New bubbles of resentment and hurt will pop to the surface as recovery goes on, and forgiveness will have to be an ongoing process. The recovery stage can be very different for various couples. Certain factors complicate the therapeutic process:

- the length and intensity of the affair, especially feelings of love and friendship,
- the state of the marital intimacy before, during, and after the affair—the depth of dishonesty, broken commitment, disrespect, and the breakdown of one-flesh bonding,
- the level of individual craziness, codependency, and the amount of environmental pressures (financial, children, illness, work) that are present in addition to the stress of the affair,
- the willingness to make changes and commit to becoming a partner again, avoiding relapses and contact with the person again.

Even with all these complex factors, God's healing grace abounds. If both partners are committed to restoring the marriage, they almost always succeed. But not everyone in the recovery phase chooses to stay married. Sometimes the couple sees themselves as having drifted too far apart, and the affair as having been the final straw. The affair may have pointed out deep flaws in their relationship which they don't think they have the energy or respectful desire to repair. The adultery may have tapped a deep core fear within the soul of the one who was betrayed, like the wife who had been molested as a child and couldn't let the walls down to rebuild trust with her unfaithful husband.

Idealism of an affair. After evaluating the marriage, the one in the affair may decide to get a divorce and marry the person with whom he or she had the affair. This can compound the mistake. Affairs are *very* idealistic and are not the best perspective from which to choose a life partner. Adulterers will say, "I'm so happy. Sex has never been this good. He is so sensitive and listens to me. We picked each other out of a crowd—it seems preordained." And, the wise counselor replies, "What do you expect? You're disgusted with your own mate and feeling disconnected, sensually needy, and angry. You quit building true intimacy with your partner. You see your lover at a planned time when you are rested, well-groomed, and at your best. Are you surprised it feels good? What would happen if you devoted the same amount of time and energy to your own marriage and sex life?"

Breaking off a love relationship. When the adulterer has allowed a real love relationship to build, never underestimate the difficulty in breaking that bond. Too often a therapist sadly learns he or she has underestimated the depth of the attraction and commitment to the affairee, and relapse occurs.

One metaphor that clients have found helpful while recovering from affairs is the old idea that apples and oranges are different. It helps them see their spouses as apples and their former lovers as oranges. Apples and oranges are different relationships with different debit and credit columns. A wife exclaimed, "But I could be happily married to him!" Of course she could. In the course of a lifetime, a person will meet many people to whom he or she could be happily married. That is what commitment is all about: the process of building one's own special covenant soulmate relationship.

The cheater has allowed him or herself to become fascinated and fall in love with oranges. It is a difficult reconditioning process to leave that and fall in love again with the qualities of apples. Not to push the metaphor, but both relationships have similar fruit characteristics. Everything about the orange was not wrong but genuine intimacy was created. As in classical conditioning it is now a question of extinguishing the destruc-

tive part of the orange stimulus and pairing up excitement and love with the apple-of-recreating commitment to the marriage and spouse.

Diehm (1986) in his book *Staying in Love* gives some excellent advice as he stresses using one's mind to wisely mobilize the will in making choices—not relying on feelings. He recommends the following simple cognitive psychology, which can be utilized with your counselees.

- Write down a list of the possible consequences of your behavior. Then check with three wise people to see if this list is a true "Thinking List" or an irrational "Feeling List."
- Answer the question, "If there were no such thing as sex, how would I feel toward this person?"
- Ask, "If God were to give me a personal audition, what would he say about my plans to love that person?"
- Throw your powerful brain into the battle against the influence of a false love. Every hour on the hour, say to yourself, "I love my spouse. I choose to turn away from this new person in my life.... Remember you are breaking a bad habit.... With God's help you are going to win. (pp. 75-76)

Second honeymoon. An interesting phenomenon that therapists should be aware of is that many couples experience a second honeymoon as a part of the recovery phase. This response is understandable and can help to heal wounds and rebond the marriage. The one involved in the affair is relieved to be beyond the secrecy and guilt and is rediscovering some of the reasons he or she was originally attracted to the partner. The one cheated on, after dealing with anger and betrayal, is excited not to have lost a mate. After their marriage had such a close call,

both have their adrenaline flowing and deeply appreciate that the disaster was averted. Sex has been forced out into the open with romantic activity and libido running high.

Sometimes as an intervention in the marriage, it is good to prescribe a second honeymoon. One client couple, immediately after working on the discovery stage, planned 10 days away to play, heal, and reconnect. It demonstrated how many right reasons they still had for staying married to each other. The fog was dissipated greatly and they could see how much they had to lose.

The problem with the honeymoon phenomenon is that it can sweep issues under the rug that only later come back to haunt the marriage. Individual and relational problems are not surfaced and resolved. The counselor must work to be sure that this does not happen as a result of the honeymoon. He or she can encourage the positive part of bonding but resist any tendency to ignore conflict or deal with the painful reality of healing.

Therapeutic interventions involving the recovery phase.

1. Encourage and give homework assignments to promote cognitive restructuring and recommitment to the marriage. One husband put an index card in his wallet and reviewed it daily for a while. On one side were all the wonderful qualities of his wife. On the other side were the flaws in the adulterous relationship and what he stood to lose. The affair was an orange and that relationship was very different from his mate's appleness. Counselors can help the ones who have built adulterous relationships get beyond comparison and rebuild their marriages to places they have never been. The focus centers on enjoying and honoring apples and falling back in love with the mate.
2. Do relapse prevention and do not take for granted that the adulterer has let go of the affair. An important part of relapse prevention is to ask in every counseling session whether contact has been made with the adulteree. One husband stated

that had he been asked, he would have made an honest reply. Another part of relapse prevention is to fill the vacuum that has been created by the absence of the affair. This can be done by bringing the mate in to take his or her legitimate place. It will also take work on parts of the marriage that helped create the affair or made the marriage vulnerable.

3. Continue to deal with the "message" of the affair and what changes need to take place individually and corporately in the marriage. Put a growth plan in place and be a very proactive coach. Utilize the affair as a catalyst for change. Often the affair is symptomatic of flaws that were there long before the affair. One husband realized how easily he was swayed by life. He did not know how to be proactively assertive and was an easy target for an office predator. She seduced him and he did not stop or end it till his wife discovered the affair. He slowly learned to be assertive. There are many rough edges that can need polishing like sexual inhibitedness, busyness, and ignorance of gender differences.
4. Help counselees see the need to build an accountability network. Rationalizations and errors in judgment are not easily recognized. People need *confessors* as well as those who can *confront* attitudes and behaviors that may be straying from God's wisdom and economy. God gives people a conscience and accountability to protect themselves from their own sinful propensities. A better support network is often vital to continue healing and to prevent future affairs.
5. Keep reassuring the mate who was cheated on that the flashbacks are normal and will become fewer and fewer as time goes on. He or she can get impatient as so much continues months later to trigger anger and reminders of the affair. This recovery process takes months and not days, and this normalizing of the length of time helps the healing.
6. Deal with the sexual part of the marriage

and encourage some reading. The couple's sex life may be in an unrealistic honeymoon phase or still shut down. Meaningful lovemaking is important for healing. Get them to read some helpful books on sex like *A Celebration of Sex* (Rosenau, 1994). Encourage an AIDS test if this would be reassuring. Maybe this is the time to do something more permanent about birth control and get that vasectomy. Again, utilize the affair as a positive catalyst for overall change in the marriage.

The Resolution Phase

The couples working on recovery slowly reestablish the equilibrium and deepen the intimacy of their partnership. Now comes a very crucial time in each of their marriages — the final resolution phase of an affair as the *healing process merges back into the humdrum of routine existence*. Carder (1992) wisely encourages couples to be certain that recovery is accomplished before prematurely moving on. The counselor should ask and assist couples: Has the anger been resolved rather than repressed? Has the forgiving been too easy and quick without the painful process? Do you understand the "message" (there is always a message given) of this affair? Have the contributing factors been resolved? Has the special intimate world of the marriage been carefully rebuilt? (Carder, 1992, p., 191-203)

Dilemma of the resolution phase. In the resolution phase, the marriage either continues to grow stronger from the base of recovery and all the changes that have been made, or settles back into the same ruts and craziness that makes it vulnerable to future affairs, sometimes with mates changing roles.

Changing personal and relational patterns in a permanent manner is not easy. The continued emotional and spiritual growth is hard won, as both partners continually resist sliding back into old patterns and ruts. Therapists can encourage couples to flag warning signs that they are in danger of relapse and to become self-monitoring.

The scars of an affair will still haunt the marriage occasionally. Wise couples try not to avoid the flashbacks but talk them through and claim God's promise (2 Cor. 7:14):

"If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal" This is a journey of growing spiritually and healing.

Continual growth. Counseling can encourage couples to grow up and become Christlike — personally and maritally! Remember that problems often precipitate affairs. Therapy can take new directions to heal and eliminate skills deficits: addictions or anger, the fear of conflict and assertiveness, or letting walls down. Encourage couples to keep you as counselor in their support network. Semi-annual checkups can help prevent lapsing back into old patterns as the therapist pointedly reviews how changes are progressing.

In the resolution phase, mates must be taught to constantly love and affirm the beauty of the mate and marriage as they make continuing changes. One Snoopy poster reads, "The other man's grass is always greener until you get there and find out it is artificial turf." In the resolution phase, counseling and growth have taken the focus off the mate's flaws and dissatisfaction with the partnership. A blossoming love enjoys and builds the credit column while cutting slack for the debit column (1 Cor. 13:4-6).

The counselor is discouraging comparisons and encouraging the uniqueness of the marital partnership with deep God-given commitment. Petersen (1983), in his book *The Myth of the Greener Grass*, teaches couples to affair-proof their marriages and never "compare the incomparable. No two marriages are in any way alike. Therefore, to compare them is a negative exercise, breeding negative results" (p.177). In this phase, a unique marriage is being nurtured with mutual cooperation, trust, and respect. The counseling process can continue to be an important part of this growth process and cementing healing. The counselor has become an agent more of enrichment than problem-solving in this final phase.

Therapeutic interventions involving the resolution phase.

1. Counselors can help couples flag some

behaviors that become warning signals that the partnership is losing some of its intimacy and becoming vulnerable. When the red flag pops up, they take notice and actively make changes. Here are a variety of behaviors that counselors can help couples flag:

- making love infrequently and falling short of sexual goals;
- avoiding conflict and gunny-sacking anger;
- neglecting spirituality: no prayer, poor church attendance, etc.;
- keeping secrets or tiptoeing around some issue;
- canceling date nights and lack of time alone together.

2. This is a time for marriage enrichment as well as rebuilding. Tidy up any loose ends and encourage a new level of intimacy. This can be a great time for a meaningful marriage retreat, seminar, or enrichment weekend.
3. Ultimately, spiritual growth will be a most vital prevention and catalyst for new wisdom and growth. Help couples pray and have devotions together and grow to new spiritual depths individually and jointly. Guide them beyond trite solutions into a disciplined journey that accesses the power of God. Help them create a real love relationship with their Savior.
4. Continue to teach the skills of great marriages: hanging out together and having dates, easy forgiveness, and focusing on each other's credit column as they fall more deeply in love. As therapy wraps up, encourage biannual checkups, and do the things a therapist often does with a termination session: point out where they were, the many changes that have been made, and possible sabotages of the present growth, then create a growth plan tailored to the individual couple.

Future Research Issues

Certain research issues and questions can stem from the many Christians and Christian leaders who are caught up in adultery. Are Christians just as prone to engaging in extramarital affairs as those outside the church? Might there be special dynamics that can make a Christian more vulnerable in certain situations? Are Christian leaders especially exposed? Is the sin of adultery more rife in today's church than in times past? If so, why? What are the implications of many believers having repeated affairs? What type of education and educational programs could more effectively create prevention, rather than heal marriages after the fact? How can pastors and therapists, who hear sordid and titillating confessions, keep pure and monogamous in thought life and behavior? How can they work with those having affairs and keep the sexual surges and fantasies in check in a disciplined, godly manner?

Observations

Worldly ethics do seem to have permeated the church, and Christians have more cavalier attitudes toward affairs. Pastors and counselors have a frontline responsibility and opportunity to be proactive in changing attitudes and preventing adulteration before the fact. We must teach more from the pulpit, the Sunday school classroom, and in the counseling office.

Pastors and counselors must learn and practice the skills of being excellent confessors and dealing with guilt and shame wisely. Remember that sometimes it will be necessary for a therapist to send a client to his or her pastor/priest for a formal confession with God's representative in order for that person to feel truly forgiven and whole.

Another observation is that not every counselor or pastor should work with affairs or hear confessions. If we want to be healing agents in this area, we must get our own thought life and sexuality in order or we will be led into temptation—probably not with our clients but in our fantasy life. Continual discipline is needed for the person God has called to work with his lambs caught in adultery. It can be lurid as well as depressingly

sad. We will each need our own accountability and growth network to be solidly in place.

How can we know if we should not be working with counseling affairs? Do you have a support network in place which includes a supervisor or a peer supervision group? Are you aware of personal sexual issues you have not dealt with that may be triggered by the affair counseling? Do you ask questions out of curiosity rather than to be therapeutic? Does your mind continually dwell on lurid details, perhaps with envy? Do you sexualize your clients? Does the counseling make you continually angry and depressed? If you are answering yes to these questions, then I would be wary.

We will have to pray that God can help us be healing agents without lapsing into cynicism, taking personally the marriages broken beyond repair, or engaging in despair. It is amazing how many marriages are put back together even stronger, in spite of or because of an affair. How great that the Almighty can creatively work above and beyond the sin and stupidity of human beings to bring healing and growth.

A final observation is that the Body of Christ needs to band together, both pastor and professional counselor. Each shares a common theology that desires to create intimate, one-flesh, covenant relationships that are based on love, honesty, and a deep commitment. Adultery proliferates in our society, and the ultimate answers are spiritual. We must apply the growth principles of the Christian life as well as the healing skills of confession, repentance, restitution, and forgiveness. We have *the answers* for prevention and healing of extramarital affairs.

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