

# Why people have affairs—and how a relationship can recover

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Credit: Rush University Medical Center

"Life is short. Have an affair." That was the marketing slogan of AshleyMadison.com, a dating site aimed at people who are married or in

committed relationships. When the site was hacked, releasing users' information onto the Web, it was national news that sparked countless conversations about infidelity and its consequences.

We asked Ann Hartlage, PhD, a psychologist at Rush University Medical Center and the director of Rush's Marital and Sex Therapy Program to guide us through this emotionally-charged issue. Here's what she had to say.

## **Why do people have affairs?**

It's a complex question, and of course the answer is different for every situation. But most affairs aren't really about sex ... or, rather, they don't have anything to do with a sexual problem between a couple. Much more often, they happen when the couple has difficulty resolving conflict.

All couples have problems sometimes, but the way they solve—or don't solve—those problems can set a pattern. These are some common problems couples experience:

- They've attempted to sort out an issue or disagreement but feel like they've tried over and over without success.
- They avoid conflict.
- One or both partners feel the other person consistently isn't listening or doesn't understand; one response is to find a listening ear elsewhere—someone who's sympathetic.

Most often, that's how affairs begin.

## **The type of affair matters**

Often, the duration of the affair does make a difference. If the affair

was a one-night stand, for example, it can be explained away; everybody makes mistakes. While it's still painful for the spouse, it might be easier to accept.

The longer an affair lasts, the more of the couple's history together has to be reinterpreted. The spouse thought of the [relationship](#) in one way before discovering the affair, but then has to re-evaluate his or her concept and experience of the relationship during the time the affair was going on.

Also, remember that affairs aren't always sexual; sometimes they're purely emotional. Women tend to be more upset about their partners' emotional affairs than they are about physical [affairs](#). As a group and in comparison to men, women are very relationship-oriented, so their sense of betrayal can be very strong.

Whatever the type, if there's been more than one affair—especially if the couple has worked through the first one—the person discovering the affair probably remembers how painful and difficult it was to make peace the first time, and will be more reluctant to go through that again.

## **Affairs don't always lead to break-ups**

Statistics show that most relationships do make it past this, and that couples who commit to seeing a therapist—couples therapy—have a very good chance.

The first thing people deal with is usually a lot of rage, a lot of, "How could you do this to me?"

That high emotional volatility takes time to die down, and a therapist can be very helpful in working through these emotions. You have to get past the natural impulse on one person's (or both people's) part to give up and

flee—it's important to remember that decisions made in crisis are rarely the best ones for the long term.

## **Therapy gets at the heart of the matter**

Steering through the aftermath of an affair can be pretty tough to do without a therapist, because emotions are running so hot that it's easy to get stuck in an angry place. The spouse is angry about the affair, and the one who had the affair is angry about all the questions they're having to answer.

A therapist will help the couple try to figure out what happened and why. The more both parties come to an understanding of the situation, the more it helps.

The affair is entirely the responsibility of the person who cheated. Nobody forced them to make that decision. But it's still important to look at the factors in the relationship that led to the decision. What was going on in the relationship that made it easier to be involved with someone else, and what can be done to fix it?

### **You *can* rebuild trust**

Can you ever trust a cheating spouse again? It's possible, but it takes time and effort.

The spouse needs to feel as though the person who had the affair truly understands him or her. Many times, the one who had the affair comes into therapy very defensive or saying, "Let's just start over as if nothing happened." However, the spouse needs to be able to ask questions.

Sometimes, it can be helpful if the one who had the affair is also in individual therapy to clarify why he or she took that path.

Ultimately, if the couple can talk about what happened in the relationship and each person's contributions to that dynamic, that's what helps the most.

## **A story of a couple who stayed together**

I worked with one couple in which the husband had an affair, and the wife immediately just wanted to get out of the marriage.

As we talked, she decided not to go with that impulsive decision. And as the three of us got deeper into the story, she realized that she'd made a habit of giving her husband the message, "Don't ever talk about anything that might upset me."

A lot of emotions were swept under the rug instead of the couple talking them through, and he turned elsewhere for emotional connection. They both acknowledged their part in that scenario, then worked through it. In the end, they salvaged the relationship.

## **Cheating isn't necessarily habitual**

Is the saying "once a cheater, always a cheater" true?

Of course there are serial cheaters, but usually the people who see a therapist are facing this situation for the first time. Serial cheaters are too busy to bother with couples' therapy.

Provided by Rush University Medical Center

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