WHY DO MARRIED PEOPLE HAVE AFFAIRS?

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INTRODUCTION

On January 9, 1981, at 6:30 p.m., I had my first session as a divorce mediator. My clients, Kathy and Jim, were in their late 40’s. Jim was the branch manager of Shawmut, a small Northeast bank, while Kathy was a homemaker, with a part-time sales position at Filenes’s. They had recently celebrated their 20th anniversary.

Both thought their marriage would last forever, even Jim, though he was the one who had the affair. Since that first day, the number of clients having an affair has increased, and this pattern holds true across the United States. Why are the numbers increasing? Why do married people have affairs?

REASONS FOR INCREASING NUMBERS:

There are several reasons for the increase, but the primary ones are the changes over the years of people having more free time, an increased opportunity to meet people, and society’s more accepting attitude. Personal time has increased - at
least, in theory - gone is the mandatory 10 hour sweatshop day. More opportunities exist to meet people; the work place, get-togethers, in adult classes, clubs and sports and social activities. Though time and opportunity are important, the critical issue is a person’s attitude toward having an affair – which mirrors society’s attitude. And, when it’s about love - Americans hold fast to the idea that finding love is a soul’s right. It’s a funny way to put it, yet most of you will know what I mean.

THE CHANGING WORLD OF WIVES AND HUSBANDS

Years ago, the rules within a marriage were different--easier, many would say—husbands worked to support their family, and wives took care of the home and children. “Fulfilling yourself” was not a purpose of marital life. Today, however, we expect personal growth within marriage and companionship with our spouse, as well as meeting all the demands of our roles. Couples balance two careers, take care of their children and keep up with their home, and increasingly, care for aging parents. Women are still primarily responsible for children and most now work outside the home, while men are expected to be “sensitive” as well as a good breadwinner. Even sex with a spouse has pressure--how often, how many, what kind of orgasm.
Many people seek an outlet for their pressures. The more athletically predisposed may join gyms and fitness centers, while others take classes or meditate and do yoga, and antidepressants, are hardly uncommon. Some people engage in behavior which ultimately adds to their troubles – drinking or drugging.

And, some have an affair.

**ROAD TO DIVORCE**

During the early years of my practice, I asked clients, “When did you first start thinking divorce?” The first answer was, “the night we went out for our tenth anniversary.” Another said, “the day after our son was born.” I stopped directly asking that question, but as the years went by, I heard that people spend a long time thinking about divorce before acting on it. They don’t wake up one day and suddenly decide to divorce. Contrary to the popular belief that people shed a marriage as easily as last year’s coat, acting on one’s decision to divorce is difficult, especially in a long term marriage or when there are children.

Strong factors encourage spouses to stay together; our belief that marriage is forever, that we want to keep the vows we made, that divorce is harmful to our children, and not wanting to hurt our spouse and fear of being alone.
Many people stay in a marriage because they regard divorce as a personal failure. Though we are a society with a high divorce rate, divorce is not considered a good thing, or even a neutral event, rather, it may believe the person didn’t try hard enough to make the marriage work. Divorce is seen as the easy way out.

Society has long held that you need good reasons to divorce. Although love is the only reason needed to marry, people want solid reasons for divorce, and surprisingly, over the years, these solid reasons still consist of alcohol and drug abuse, domestic violence, and the affair. With a 50% plus divorce rate for first time marriages, and a 60% plus rate for second marriages, the ideal of a forever marriage may be more myth than truth.

**WHY DO HUSBANDS AND WIVES HAVE AFFAIRS?**

A number of therapists believe that the unconscious purpose of an affair is to end the marriage. In over 90% of the hundreds of divorcing couples that I’ve worked with, only one spouse wanted the divorce, while their spouse wanted to stay married, at least, until they find out about an affair.

**REASONS FOR AN AFFAIR**
All of us want to feel good about ourselves, and if you don’t feel that way, you may seek it from another person. Of course, you don’t “get” self-esteem by having someone give it to you, rather, self-esteem develops early in life and is shaped during your lifetime. But for the short-term, a lover makes you feel good about yourself.

A lover often gives a person the courage to do something he or she couldn’t do alone, which is to ask their spouse for a divorce.

Often, a person does not start out intending to have an affair. It may have been the furthest thing from their mind, but, once involved, they believe they can keep the affair in one little corner of their life. A person may feel they are not hurting anyone. An affair often enables the person to be more sexually adventurous and to express their sexuality - in ways not done with their spouse. The results are heady.

I’ve listed the primary reasons for having an affair, but keep in mind that some of the reasons exist simultaneously. In fact, rarely is there a single reason why a married person has an affair; rather, there’s a combination of reasons.

**The Primary Reasons for an Affair**

1. Excitement
2. Romantic Love
3. Sex
4. Mid-life Crisis
5. Anger
6. Escape
7. Loneliness
8. Obsession
9. Soul mate
10. Lesbian/Gay Orientation

1. EXCITEMENT

By definition, affairs are exciting; a new lover’s desires, intense eye contact and lorry kisses, the secret meetings colored by the danger of getting caught. There affair is driven by a desire to put excitement and adventure into a life that feeling boring.

The marital relationship may not be the only reason for the boredom, but it’s an easy target. Boredom is likely caused by a number of things; work is tedious, the daily routine tiresome, and the spouse and, well, life, itself is too predictable.

Rather than work on improving these, the affair brings excitement.

2. ROMANTIC LOVE
A search for love is the stereotypical reason many people believe a married woman has an affair, that she wants flowers sent to her when it isn’t her birthday or anniversary that she yearns for dinners in hide-a-way restaurants, and seeks meaningful glances and soft kisses. As a society, we believe in the power of romantic love, and this is true of men as is of women. After years of watching Casablanca, men and women long for the romance they see on the screen. An affair can be the spark of romantic love with another person.

3. SEX

Your fantasies come to life. The stereotypical reason people believe a married man has an affair is for sex; that a man wants more sex than his wife does, or more variety, that, biologically that men are sexually promiscuous. These attitudes ignore the behavior of many women.

4. MID-LIFE CRISIS

Midlife is a time many seek “meaning” in their life. It’s not unheard of for that meaning to take the format of a lover. A married person experiencing a mid-life crisis wants change in their life, whether it’s a different life, a kind of life, or more out of their life. Some are simply unhappy with their life. You’ve heard the stories – middle aged man buys a little red sports car, a woman starting menopause dresses like her 15 year old daughter.
5. ANGER

There are many ways that clients express anger. One client got back at his wife by having an affair because his wife had one. He was shocked when she asked for a divorce when she found out. Anger is such a common reaction for so many things that happen in a relationship. Sometimes anger is justified.

6. ESCAPE

Married couples spend their free time together, which might be fine for one person, but the other spouse may feel suffocated. For that spouse, an affair provides an escape—gives someone an avenue to separateness.

Thelma and Louise may be dead, but in many hearts, they live on. For a married woman who feels trapped in her roles of wife and homemaker, the movie hit a nerve and, of course, there was an affair along the way. Years before and after Thelma and Louise, men escaped their married life by running into another woman’s arms.

7. LONELINESS
I think this reason speaks for itself. Last winter, a client told me, “when I sit on the couch with my husband, I feel lonely, and yet he’s with me. I’d rather be all by myself, then it would make sense that I’m lonely”. Many men and women hope their spouse will take away their loneliness, and when that doesn’t happen, some end their loneliness with a lover.

8. OBSESSION

Obsession is best described as an addiction to another person. For that man or woman, thoughts of their lover pervade virtually every hour of their life. They yearn to be with the object of their obsession though sometimes, the person isn’t their lover, and their unrequited love may create more of an obsession.

9. SOUL MATE

A soul mate is a person who so complements and shares your thoughts and worldview that you believe you were meant to be together. When someone finds a lover who understands them because they share so much and are so alike—it’s a powerful draw.

10. LESBIAN/GAY

There are gay men and lesbians in heterosexual marriages. There are many reasons lesbians and gay men stay married, and some mirror the reasons that heterosexuals
stay together: they want to keep their family intact, or don’t want to hurt their spouse. They have an affair because they want a sexual relationship with someone of their own gender, and most end up coming out, and divorce their spouse.

THE EFFECT OF AN AFFAIR ON DIVORCE

Asking “does an affair affect the divorce process” is a pretty unsophisticated question. A better one is “how much does an affair affect the divorce process?”

The two responses here, are “legal” and “emotional”. Legally, the short answer is “not much, really”. Emotionally, the short answer is “very, much – really”.

Some marriages survive the crisis – while others do not. I see the ones that do not survive. I see those who are getting divorced

**Emotional Effect Upon Divorce**

An affair creates a crisis for the married couple. I want to add that an affair almost always affects the marital relationship whether or not the spouse knows about it, because of the mental preoccupation with his or her lover affects their ability to connect with their spouse. When a spouse discovers the existence of an affair, she or he is profoundly angry from being lied to and deceived. They are deeply hurt by their spouse choosing to sleep with another. The feelings of rejection are often left unexpressed, yet the rejection eats away at their self esteem. The betrayal of
trust makes so much of the past years suspect;” Did she tell me the truth about loving me?” “Am I a fool to believe he thought I was special?” The anger, hurt and suspicion will create difficult negotiations of the divorce settlement, as one question moves to the forefront, “What else is my spouse lying about?”

The spouse having the affair often feels guilty for the hurt they have caused. On the other hand, some believe they are entitled to happiness, and if that involves being with another person, so be it. Still others blame the non-straying spouse for their part in an unhappy marriage, so that, surprisingly, the person having the affair is as angry as their spouse.

**Legal Effect upon Divorce:**

Adultery is the legal word for a married person having an affair. The definition is voluntary sexual intercourse between a married individual and a person other than the lawful spouse. That definition has certainly been challenged with the very public revelations of Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky, so that today, people consider adultery any kind of sexual activity.

Historically, adultery was the most common ground for divorce. In some states, it was the only ground, hence, in order to prove adultery in a court of law, you could hire a private detective to snap photographs of the errant spouse in bed with their lover – the photographs providing evidence of the breach of marital vows.
At common law, a husband had a marital duty to financially support his wife whereas a wife had no such duty of support. Adultery was a clear sign of fault, and the legal consequence was that the party at fault paid a financial price. When a husband was at fault because he committed adultery, his financial duty to his wife continued after the marriage ended, as the judge ordered him to pay alimony. When a wife was at fault because she committed adultery, her husband’s duty to support her ended. As most wives were financially dependent on their husband, if she didn’t remarry, her future financial situation would be precarious at best, with a good chance that she would end up destitute.

**No-Fault Divorce**

With the introduction of no-fault divorce laws in the U.S., the issue of fault was mainly put to rest. The new laws were founded on the theory that fault should not be the basis for determining financial support and division of assets and liabilities. If support was needed and as long as one spouse had greater income the judge would order alimony. This no-fault attitude carried over to fault based divorce settlements awards, so that even if there was adultery, it wouldn’t excuse alimony payments.
Though many states continue to list adultery as a ground for divorce, the spouse at fault is not financially punished. By the way, gender differences have softened, so that today, higher income wives are required to pay alimony.

**WHETHER AN AFFAIR LEADS TO DIVORCE**

A high number of factors are involved in whether or not an affair will lead to divorce. The following factors point to whether a couple will divorce. The first reason – an on-going affair - almost inevitably leads to divorce. The second two factors; identity of the lover and the commitment to the marriage, are also very important. The remaining reasons depend on many factors, and rarely does one factor stand alone as the sole reason to divorce.

1. On-going Affair
2. Identity of the Lover.
3. Commitment to the Marriage
4. Length of the Marriage
5. Length of the Affair
6. Ages of the Spouse
7. Presence of Children
8. Attachment between the Straying Spouse and their Lover
9. Traits of Each Spouse
10. Strength of the Emotional Bond Between the Spouses
On-going Affair

When a person continues an affair after their spouse finds out about it, that individual is forcing a divorce. This forcing may be unconscious, and calls to mind the adage, “actions speak louder than words.” Many times, during a mediation, a client will say, “I asked her to stop seeing him and work on our marriage, but she wouldn’t.” Divorce is the next step for this couple.

Identity of the Lover

One of my clients slept with his wife’s best friend; another client with her husband’s co-worker. In professional articles on divorce the identity of the lover is a critical issue which rarely is given the importance in. This situation causes a bitter divorce when a married person has an affair with someone who is in the close world of their spouse, it causes intense humiliation.

I came across a research paper stating that when psychologists want to study anger, they humiliate their subject, a sure fire way to get someone angry. Psychologists view the humiliating choice of a lover as an expression of deep anger toward their spouse. So unfortunately, people have affairs with individuals who they come into contact with, so these situations are far from uncommon.
Commitment to the Marriage

In the absence of an on-going affair the commitment of each person to the marital relationship with determine if divorce is the outcome. When both spouses believe that one stays married regardless of what happens – that marriage will continue. If one looks at the number of people who admit to having an affair (acknowledging that there are more people who don’t admit it), and compare that number with the divorce rate, it is clear that every affair does not lead to divorce.

Length of the Marriage

The longer the marriage, the harder is the decision to divorce. The divorce rate is significantly higher among short term marriages.

Length of the Affair

Time alone is not the determinate factor, but generally provides an indication of the degree of anger and hurt for the non-straying spouse. For example, a two month affair is less upsetting than a twelve year affair. The following time lengths are approximations.

One-night stand

A one-night stand affair is the least upsetting for the spouse—please don’t take the “one night” literally, it can be two days or two weeks.
Short-Term Affair

A short-term affair lasts less than three months. Though upsetting, it does not necessarily cause the marriage to end.

Medium Length Affair

The length of this affair ranges from three to eighteen months. It is far more damaging to the marital relationship than a short term affair.

Long-Term Affair

An affair which last over eighteen months can cause the non-straying spouse to believe that their marriage has been one big lie. This marriage will have a difficult time surviving.

Ages of the Spouse

In years past, the age of the spouses provided a strong indication of whether an affair would lead to divorce, divorce was significantly more common among younger people than older ones. Though that is still true, today, it is less true. Couples in their fifties and sixties now have a higher divorce rate, and I thought it was intent that the AARP recently wrote an article about married couples over 55 who are divorcing.
**Presence of Children**

When a parent considers divorce, they often give thought to how the divorce will affect their children. Parents still divorce. In fact, more than half of all children younger than 18 will spend some part of their childhood in the home of a single parent. Though parents are concerned about the effect of a divorce upon their children, the number of marriages that end in divorce show their children are not a definite antidote to divorce. I’ve met parents who wait until their children are out of high school before divorcing. Though these parents have the well-being of their children in mind, studies have shown that often these older children feel they were lied to— that their parents knew divorce was on the horizon and kept it a secret from them. Children have a hard time when parents are not honest with them.

**Attachment Between the “Straying Spouse” and their Lover**

The degree of the emotional attachment between the spouse having the affair and their lover is of paramount importance, though, it may not be the ultimate determinative of the end of the marriage. If the non-straying spouse believes the lovers are more intimate than the intimacy of the spouses within the marital relationship, they may feel that the emotional affair is a greater betrayal than an affair that doesn’t have that sexual aspect. A close emotional bond between the straying spouse and their lover is a sure sign that something is seriously remiss in the marital relationship. On the other hand, there are some marriages in which the
affair helps to maintain the marital relationship, as one spouse has their attachment needs met by someone else.

**Traits of Each Spouse**

A host of traits give rise to the ability or the desire of spouses to stay married. The foremost trait to continue the marital relationship is the non-straying spouse’s ability for forgiveness. Not everyone has the capacity to forgive the person who hurts them. Notice that I did not use the term “forgive and forget”.

**Strength of the Emotional Bond Between the Spouses**

The emotional bond within a marital relationship ranges from two people who co-exist to two people who have an intensely close relationship. One might assume that the strength of this bond clearly indicates whether a divorce will occur because of an affair, but this is not the case. One might also assume that if the marital relationship is simply one of co-existing - the couple’s relationship couldn’t withstand an affair, yet this is not always the case, as the expectations of the spouse are low. On the opposite end of the range, married people who consider themselves “best friends” may be the ones who divorce because their expectations of their spouse were high. If a person trusts their spouse as one would trust a best friend, the spouse feels betrayed – and may well seek divorce.
CONCLUSION

When a spouse has an affair, the marital relationship is affected, whether or not the spouse knows about it. The emotional cost of an affair ranges from disturbing to disaster.

Sometimes an affair leads to a divorce, while others do not, and I’ve noted several factors that point to whether an affair will lead to divorce.

As a divorce mediator, I have worked with well over a thousand couples when a spouse wanted an affair, and it is clear that the divorce negotiations for the couple will be far more difficult if either spouse is having an affair.

I hope that this article sheds light on a much needed issue

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