

Getting over the relationship affair

Affairs are difficult to get over, whether you're the 'injured party' (IP) or the offending party (OP) (for want of better words).

The pain of getting over an affair is made all the more difficult by the fact that the factors that trigger an affair are not well understood. This lack of understanding is made all the worse by the speed with which the OP is seen to be the villain, and the IP is seen to be the victim. This 'he's wrong' 'she's right' style of thinking frequently results in many unnecessary breakdowns in the original partnership. However, such emotional battle scars can be negotiated, and many couples develop an even more robust and loving relationship after healing from the affair.

Although affairs take many forms, the most common is a situation in which person A meets person B in relatively innocuous circumstances, and slowly a friendship develops leading to more and more needs being met. As these needs of being listened to, having feelings heard, having someone take a genuine interest in you, having stimulating intellectual discussions and the like proceed, person A gets excited (here come the endorphins) that someone is really interested in them. Many such serendipitous meetings occur in the workplace – about 35% of all affairs begin there – where stress, isolation or boredom may intensify those needs. Yet it is rare for people to intentionally set out to have an affair, except in the circumstances described below.

Understand how affairs in a marriage can be healed

Understanding the dynamics of an affair can support the healing and restoration of the original relationship. So can talking about how it all happened.

1. **Two people get on well.** Each supports the other in a friendly way.
2. **One or both people begin to find the other interestingly different from the one back home.** Curiosity is piqued, feelings begin to emerge, and endorphins (good feeling hormones) begin to surge.
3. **Unmet needs emerge.** The need to be heard, understood, taken seriously, to have interesting ideas exchanged, to feel that sexual rush, to admire and be seen with that beautiful face or body – begin to appear. (Most are unaware when most of these unmet needs appear.) These needs are even more acute if not being met elsewhere.

Examples of unmet needs:

- i. The need to feel desired, admired or loved again, or more than at present;
- ii. The need to be looked up to or even put on a pedestal (often men love an admiring younger person);
- iii. The need to know that you can still attract interest from another;
- iv. The need to meet sexual urges that might not be getting met in the marriage;
- v. The need to experience the adrenalin rush from taking a risk, or the excitement of being 'in love' or 'in lust' again;
- vi. The desire to put aside and forget about the unpleasant things going on in your life, such as stress and fears, and to feel better;
- vii. The desire to get stimulation for your mind, social life, change of scene, get out of a rut;
- viii. The need to get a message to your partner that if they don't get their act together, other options are waiting for you.

It is possible that more than one of the above could be driving the desire for someone else.

4. The difference between the feelings with this new person, and those experienced in previous day to day life are enough for the desire for more to arise. **Each party is now hooked.** Endorphins demand more of the same, so a marriage affair is born.
5. **Guilt will be less prevalent when justification for a relationship with someone 'who at last loves and cares for me' can be made.** If the partner back home has been abusive, neglectful, unappreciative, uncaring or even just disengaged and somewhat distant, the new person is like a breath of fresh air. It will be easy to justify this good feeling experience when things back home are so unpleasant or emotionally flat.
6. **The focus now is on the affair, and all else shrinks into the background.** The main reason not to think about the person back home is to believe that the situation back home can't be improved, and so there's not much to lose. This adds good reason why the new relationship 'makes good sense'.
7. **The mystique of this unique relationship sets in.** Especially in the beginning, there's a belief that the affair won't be detected, that it's essential for happiness and/or survival, and that life without the affair would be too flat and/or painful to bear. Despite the emotional discomfort of guilt and fear, the payoff seems too much to give up on.
8. **Deceit now creeps in to cover up the affair.** Even the usually most ethical people lie in order to cover up 'what the other person doesn't need to know.' There is definitely the belief that 'what they don't know about won't hurt them.' Fear and shame of being caught, the emotional impact on the IP, or coping with one's own unpleasant feelings should the affair be discovered, intensify the need for the cover up. Guilt and shame, though, rarely go away.
9. **There is very rarely a desire to hurt the partner back home.** Where that intention exists, the offending party will usually make it very apparent that they are having an affair so as to stir their partner back home back into action. Affairs are all about self, and the need for the OP to feel better.
10. **The affair spiral has begun.** The OP is now caught in a mixture of excitement for the affair, longing for the good feelings it brings, and shame and fear about being found out. Leading a double life is also stressful, and can eat into the OP's self-esteem and sense of self.
11. **There is now no comfortable way out, and seemingly no need for one.** The affair will be prolonged if the OP is unable to manage their feelings and trust their ability to address the mess they are now in, and/or bring those long lost boundaries where 'no' would have helped back into play. It may now seem easier to just continue the affair, even if this loses its lustre.
12. **The OP may also now be trapped by having a new partner who may turn nasty or very upset if the OP wants out.** The OP may also now be wondering how to manage their situation without causing pain to at least one party. Unless they get caught (which may be a relief), they can feel trapped.

The Myth of the Successful Couples Affair

Your relationship affair may not be all it's cracked up to be.

1. Most sexual affairs become emotional, and most emotional affairs become sexual, but both have a history of poor outcomes. Getting a little bit of feeling good usually leads to wanting more of the same. This slippery slope is tempting and many have found it difficult to negotiate. Relationship affairs - better known as cheating, can be very hard work.
2. When someone leaves their relationship for another person, their chances of having a successful relationship are slim. Only about 30% of second marriages are successful, and when step-children are factored into the odds, they lessen.
3. The smartest use of an affair is to determine which of your needs have not been getting met, but such self-awareness is seldom present. It is not up to any partner to meet your needs, but rather it's your responsibility to use a solid relationship to ask for support to get these met. An affair is usually too emotionally hot for the awareness of such subtle needs to be voiced.
4. Most affairs are an unconscious attempt to get unmet and unseen needs met. Although the affair may get some needs met, it will not meet needs that are unconscious to their owner.
5. An affair is not proof that one's former partner back home was not enough. Rather, it shows the inability of the original couple to know how they could have supported each other to meet needs, wants and desires, and also to meet the needs that the relationship itself required in order to remain healthy.
6. Affairs are not real and fully fledged relationships because of the following, meaning that the enjoyment of something different and the enthusiastic meeting of some needs soon wanes. Problems soon arise because of the following:
 - a. During the honeymoon period, partners are more excited, more tolerant, less discriminating, more engaging, more talkative, better at meeting the other's needs and more sensitive to the other than they will be when this period comes to a close.
 - b. After the honeymoon period, participants return to their original behaviours, no matter how determined they are to avoid repeating history. Each brings their problems with them, although these may not show up for a while. As Freud observed, our compulsion to repeat our past is inevitable.
 - c. The affair masks stressors of ordinary life such as howling children, unpaid bills, the humdrum of everyday domestic chores and the stresses that get in the way of harmony in the original partnership or marriage. These will soon impact on the affair relationship.
 - d. During the affair, the stresses of what a marriage breakup would entail are rarely considered, and easily played down if they are considered. The impacts of separation are difficult to fully imagine.
 - e. The consequences of 'divorce' of the existing marriage partner is also rarely fully considered, including the emotional and social impact on children, the compromising of the child-parent relationship, the impact on mutual friendships, the impact and attitude of relatives, the financial cost of splitting assets including chattels, the legal implications of separating, the time and emotional demands of transporting children, the difficulty of bonding with the new partner's children, the difficulty of each set of children getting on together, and the impact on the new relationship when these stressors have to be managed.

While some people do make this transition successfully, it is not for the fainthearted. Careful consideration of the consequences is vital.

Steps to take as you both heal from the affair

1. Recognise that the affair was a commentary on your relationship, not anyone as an individual, and that your relationship had not been the priority for one or both of you. What needs have you both had that have been overlooked? What would bring joie de vie back into your relationship? What could you both do to create with each other a more fulfilling life?
2. Recognise that one or both of you have not been living a healthy lifestyle. Who has been overworking, overplaying or caught in other addictive behaviours? Where has the imbalance been for both of you? How much has caring, support, teamwork and loving behaviour been overlooked but must now be addressed?
3. Surround yourselves with people who can help bring balance to the needs meeting process. These may be relatives, friends or specialists. Who is good for this relationship? Who helps us to enjoy the relationship by supporting the 'us' in our relationship?
4. Every successful relationship involves personal and couples' growth. Issues that arise (and these are inevitable) are discussed and sorted, perhaps with support from a specialist who you can both trust and feel comfortable with and has a track record of working well with couples.
5. Recognise that you must know and prioritize your own journey through life. This will create a tension between your own needs and that of the relationship. How well do you each know what you want out of life, and have talked about how to support each other to achieve this? How well do you understand the others' personality and desires, and how you can accept and support their personality and desires without giving up on your own unique journey?