

Cheating: the new therapy?



Infidelity was once the heart-shattering end of love. But with 42% of us open to forgiveness, experts now argue that it can make – not break – a relationship.

Gemma Askham asks: *really?*

Nice people don't cheat. That's what we're led to believe. And yet this is what I know: my friend James* is using 3nder, an app that pairs couples with singles wanting threesomes, while his long-term girlfriend retracts at medical school 96 miles away. In the last year, three female friends have used the 'different area code' excuse for one-night stands (one on a business trip, one working abroad and another on a girls' holiday). In one married couple, the wife allows her husband of nine years to pursue other women when he's out with his male teacher colleagues; he wants a baby, she wants a career, flings are their trade-off until she's ready.

All of these people are nice. But, like one in 2.7 couples, they're also unfaithful. Writing

with an engagement ring on my finger, a sign of assumed future fidelity, I'm stuck between my rock and a hard reality: despite studies showing that 85% of people condemn infidelity, almost 60% of men and over 45% of women do it anyway. Statistics alone are forcing relationship therapists who once berated infidelity to approach it in a hitherto unheard of way.

"Virtually all couples' therapists have believed since the field's earliest days that no troubled marriage can ever recover as long as there's a 'third party,'" confirms high-profile US sex therapist Dr Tammy Nelson. "But whether we like it or not, many couples are far less encumbered with the legal, moral and social strictures that held sway for our parents. Many couples *expect* that infidelity is likelier than not."

Is this depressing reading, or simply realism? The talking point of the Ashley Madison exposé this summer wasn't so much the hacking but the fact that an adultery site had 37 million users. Recent data by research firm GlobalWebIndex found that 12% of the 'singles' on Tinder are in relationships, while a staggering 30% are married. We've never lived in a time when two people can lie in bed together but both simultaneously e-cheat via their smartphones: one watching a webcam performance while the other sexts. Web psychologist Nathalie Nahai believes it's no coincidence that encrypted messaging services such as PQChat (which lets you wipe another person's device of the messages you've sent them) and virtual private networks (VPNs) such as TunnelBear, which protect online activity from being easily traced, are on the rise.

Accepting that infidelity a) is likely and b) occurs on platforms that are a million miles away from the quickie-with-a-colleague cliché, Dr Nelson is changing tack: actively helping couples negotiate how to be unfaithful, but in the least damaging way. The defining principle of her landmark book *The New Monogamy* is the 'monogamy contract' – a set of guidelines, thrashed out by each individual couple before they get serious, that outlines what is (and isn't) acceptable on the cheating scale. "You don't have to write a contract, but have an open discussion about what you want your monogamy to look like," she says. Think: a pre-nup for your heart, not your bank account.

It sounds like a radical and unromantic concept, but she tells me that most of us have an 'implicit' contract anyway – unsaid rules we assume to be true, anything from, 'He won't

watch porn now we're together' to 'I'm sure he'd think a drunken kiss was forgivable'. Verbalising your views takes the sting out of later discovering you're not aligned on issues such as: Is it OK to see an ex? Should we tell each other when we masturbate? Is online flirting forgivable if there's no meet-up? Could a bond with a close male friend be classed as emotional cheating?

When, two years into their marriage, Bianca, a 28-year-old finance worker and Rob, 34, became curious about having sex with another person or couple ("a drunken conversation that we kept going back to,"), they set two rules: one, that they'd only sleep with male couples to curb potential jealousy on Bianca's part and, two, regardless of who else was there, they'd always maintain eye contact or physical touch with one another. "Our love is actually stronger as we've become more open," she says.

But what about the betrayal you don't see coming? While a 2008 study proved that emotional betrayal hurts more than physical pain, new evidence is mounting on the contrary.

Rethinking Infidelity, a TED Talk that makes a case for surviving being cheated on, has had 3.1 million views since March and continues to accrue them by tens of thousands daily. Even among Relate therapists – Britain's 77-year-old counselling service – 94% believe a relationship can thrive after infidelity.

Why? Well, at it's most basic, very few affairs actually last. Janis Abrahms Spring, author of *After The Affair*, found that 10% of affairs are over in a day, while only 10% make it to a month. And the potential post-affair stigma for the betrayed party is evolving, too. In the past, "divorce carried all the shame," admits Esther Perel, the relationship coach behind the TED hit; then the shame moved to "choosing to stay." *Now*, as we realise that a Tinder-style 'onto the next person' approach doesn't necessarily lead to better love, we're re-accepting that "people are imperfect and relationships take work," as *Psychology Today* therapist Michael J Formica says.

The motivation for cheating is also becoming less personal. Last year, the University of Winchester interviewed 100 ►

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◀ women signed up to adultery websites and found that not one of them actually wanted to leave their partner; in fact, most said how much they loved them.

Instead of being about lust, among young couples, Perel is seeing infidelity become a way to assert their independence. She told *Slate*, “When I entered marriage, I bought into the whole romantic package: I want to never feel anxious again, never feel a fear of abandonment. But that’s very different than the millennials I work with. Their fear is that they will lose themselves, because they’ve worked so hard to develop their own identities.”

It was rebellion against the “conformity, monotony and responsibility” of planning her wedding that tempted Louise, a 27-year-old PA, to reciprocate exchanging graphic messages when a guy she’d online-dated years ago contacted her out of the blue. She has no intention of it going further – but sees her pre-wedding sexting as the last chance she’ll get for this kind of illicit, no-strings flirtation.

For Steve*, a physiotherapist, and Maria*, a nurse, now in their thirties, meeting at age 18 and 16, respectively, has meant several affairs – on both sides – as they’ve tried to reconcile having met so young with not missing out. Now recently married, neither is under any illusion about the other’s former infidelity, although the intimate details of who, when and what happened are something both parties agree they’d rather not know.

The kicker, of course, is what happens when you *do* know? Relate counsellor Peter Saddington believes that as our modern society becomes more open to new forms of relationships and attraction in general, “there is more flexibility in how people respond and more room for forgiveness.”

Esther Perel goes as far as to argue that the potential threat of losing a partner can dramatically increase your attraction to them. “Something about the fear of loss will rekindle desire,” she says, though with two caveats. Firstly, the perpetrator acknowledges their wrongdoing, actively seeks forgiveness, and helps stop the other person from obsessing. Secondly, the betrayed party must curb their curiosity to mine the sordid details (“Where did you do it? How ▶

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INFIDELITY IN NUMBERS

63% of people are aware that they’ve been cheated on

3% of men marry the woman they have an affair with – of those marriages, 75% end in divorce

1/3 The number of us who’ve thought about having an affair

5% of women have an affair with another woman

A male friend = the most common person for a woman to cheat with (53% of all female affairs)

19% of women admit that they’d cheat if it was guaranteed they wouldn’t get caught

18.3% of married women have cheated on their current partner at least once

3.5 The number of times more likely someone who’s previously cheated is to do it again

The four types of affair

Yes, four! Therapist Michael J Formica breaks them down

OBJECT AFFAIR When one partner’s attention is drawn away from the relationship by a ‘thing’ – work or a hobby or interest.

SEXUAL AFFAIR A liaison driven purely by physical desire. It’s usually just sex, and lacks emotional intimacy.

EMOTIONAL AFFAIR Based on fantasy, rather than meet-ups. Interaction takes place by text, email or online.

SECONDARY RELATIONSHIP A full-blown affair that includes sexual contact, friendship, common interests and routines.



◀ often? Are they better than me in bed?”), which will only inflict more pain.

Somewhere between Saddington’s potential forgiveness and Perel’s potentially fired-up libido is the middle ground: that infidelity can highlight what your relationship is missing. “Sometimes, it’s difficult to define what’s wrong. A secondary relationship can provide a window into what may be lacking,” adds Formica.

The key, above all, is communication, whether that’s handling a now-public affair, or negotiating your terms beforehand. As Nelson explains, “Most couples practising what I call the ‘new monogamy’ still want long-term loving attachment, affection, mutual trust and security. It’s just that their notions about what constitutes emotional and sexual ‘commitment’, ‘fidelity’ and ‘monogamy’ are more expansive than what we’ve long considered the norm.”

For eternity, we’ve been told that the right thing to do is to be faithful. Yet for many couples, the right thing for them is not to be. And maybe, just maybe, that isn’t as shocking as it sounds. ©

Relate provides services that can help support anyone with the aftermath of an affair. relate.org.uk

Could YOU forgive an affair?

PROBABLY, if...

1 You can listen to your partner and vent anger This way, you find out why they did it and discover it’s not about you.

2 You don’t expect a quick fix If you do, you’ll think the lack of progress is because your relationship is fundamentally flawed. But you’ve been hurt; it takes time and patience to recover.

3 You get help Reading books, seeing a professional or speaking to a friend who has survived infidelity. You’ll understand that pain is normal and doesn’t last forever, and it stops you from blaming yourself.

4 You can learn from it It could be improved communication or better understanding your feelings. If you can get something positive, it’s easier to bear.

LESS LIKELY, if...

1 The betrayal was extreme For example, the affair went on for a long time, involved multiple partners, you know the other person or there’s a lasting consequence, such as a child.

2 Every single row comes back to the affair Even though it started about him leaving the top off the milk.

3 It’s crippling your self-esteem You feel that your partner’s deceit was all about you, rather than his demons.

4 There’s unexpected sexual betrayal You’ve discovered things about your partner that disgust you, or they’ve said the affair is over – but continue anyway.

By Andrew G Marshall, author of new book *I Can’t Get Over My Partner’s Affair* (Marshall Method Publishing, £9.99, out now)