

When Your Spouse has had Multiple Affairs

By Anne Bercht

Question: *My spouse has had multiple affairs, or at least more than one. What should I do? How many times should I forgive? What is the best way to handle it ... especially since I want to stay married?*

The answer so many give is:

“Once a cheater, always a cheater.”

This blanket statement is not true. Yet, in most cases where there has been an affair, there will be more affairs. This statistical reality has less to do with the perceived irrevocable character flaw, and more to do with the fact that there is so little good help out there for couples who wish to heal their marriages and remain true to their promises to each other.

Before I go further, let me qualify this, by making it clear that I’m talking about good people, who meant their wedding vows 100% when they made them, and like, my husband, Brian, never imagined they would ever break them. Having an affair goes against their own moral code they have set for themselves, and in many cases it goes against the teachings of their faith, which they fully believe in.

There is a whole genre of people in our culture today who believe monogamy is unrealistic. Everyone has affairs. What’s the big deal? Clearly if this is your belief system you are going to cheat. These people, however, are not our clients. I’m writing about good people who meant their wedding vows, and now that they’re broken wish to not only do all within their power to right their wrongs, but to make sure they never have an affair again.

If you are married to someone, who only gives lip service to monogamy, but inwardly believes affairs are normal and monogamy is unrealistic, or that they’re entitled to cheat, you’re in for more affairs. The first step to enjoying all the benefits of a monogamous relationship is to believe in monogamy in the first place.

When dealing with someone who has had affair/s, you need to

BELIEVE THEIR BEHAVIOR - NOT THEIR WORDS

Promises alone are not enough to keep a person monogamous. If they were, the wedding vows would've worked the first time.

In order for a couple to establish a monogamous relationship post affair, a few things need to happen. Most importantly, the one who had the affair needs to be willing to change.

In examining what to look for, to establish adequate hope that your spouse will never cheat again, it might be worth looking at what doesn't work.

WHAT DOESN'T WORK

1. Promises are no guarantee of future monogamy.
2. Renewing your wedding vows is no guarantee.
3. Saying they will never do it again, because now they understand how painful it is, is no guarantee.

WORST OF ALL – WHAT DOESN'T WORK

4. ... Is you becoming super need-meeter spouse. While I'm all for meeting needs, and doing all you can to be a good spouse, I remain appalled at the general belief most people adhere to that the affair is about the faithful spouse not being good enough.

Why do we as a society have such a difficult time seeing the elephant in the room?!!

The affair is the responsibility of the people involved in the affair!!!! – Not the innocent party who had nothing to do with the decision to go outside marriage boundaries.

While I don't deny that troubled marriages are more susceptible to infidelity – for every marriage where there has been an affair, I can point to a more troubled marriage where there has not been an affair.

Being perfect at meeting your spouse's needs is not going to guarantee monogamy.

WHAT DOES WORK?

1. The willingness on the part of the one who had the affair, to take responsibility for their actions instead of blaming their spouse for their bad behavior.
2. The offending spouse needs to be willing to change – to discover where they went wrong, and what changes they will make in themselves to ensure that they are never even come close to crossing such boundaries again.
3. For the couple together to face the affair issues head on and deal with it, instead of trying to bury it.

If your spouse says, “why can't you just get over it?” – there is not much hope for their future monogamy. The one who had an affair needs to take responsibility for their actions, quit making excuses, and deal with the consequences of the choices they are responsible for. They need to be patient with the spouse they have betrayed and help them heal.

4. The person who has had the affair needs to be willing to face his or her own “demons.” They need to take an honest look at themselves and why they failed their own moral boundaries, instead of putting the responsibility for their unethical behavior on their spouse who didn't have an affair.
5. They need to be willing to answer the injured spouses questions about why they did what they did.
6. Together as a couple you need to discover the core issues of why the affair happened, and what will be different in the future to ensure it doesn't happen again.

7. The person who has had the affair needs to tell the truth and come completely clean. If it feels like they are not being truthful, they are probably not being truthful. There is something that feels different when someone tells the truth. One clear sign that you are getting the truth is you will sometimes get answers to your question that are not the answers you want to hear.

8. The person who had the affair needs to get educated about affairs. Both parties need to understand the real factors that lead to affair resistant marriages. Anyone, who wants to, can. It's never too late to learn how and change.

HOW MANY TIMES SHOULD YOU FORGIVE?

Only you can answer this question. There is no right or wrong here. Perhaps your spouse will continue to have affairs, and you will know this, but decide to stay anyway. If that's your decision, if that's the best life for you, it is not my place or anyone else's to tell you that that's the wrong decision for you.

But if you decide living with a cheater is not okay with you, then you better see the qualities mentioned above in action. If not, you're probably headed for more heartache. Affairs clearly don't go away from good intentions alone.

WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO HANDLE IT?

Get good outside help. Deal with the affair head on. Make a commitment to complete openness and honesty with each other. If your spouse's behavior isn't lining up with their words, and living with an ongoing cheater is not okay with you, then you may want to consider getting out of the marriage.

Ironically in many situations it is not until you are willing to take a solid stand and give up your marriage that you actually get your marriage back. Sometimes the one who had affair/s is not motivated to do their part of the changing, until they realize they are losing you.

PS – Threats don't help either. If you say you're going to leave if they don't change, they don't change, and you don't leave, you just weakened your relationship.