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### **When a Spouse Cheats**

\* Immediate divorce may not be the best reaction when a partner strays, says a bestselling author and psychologist. Sometimes there are important lessons to be learned by trying to work it out.

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Throughout her 15-year marriage, Amy told herself what any self-respecting married woman does: If my husband ever cheats on me, I'm out the door.

Then he did. And her decision wasn't so clear.

"I always said that would be my bottom line, but I completely crumbled in this conflict," said the 41-year-old mother of two. (Like all those interviewed for this story who were affected by affairs, Amy asked that her real name not be used.)

She struggled with her warring feelings. Part of her said she would not tolerate it, but then there were the kids and the new house she and her husband had built in Connecticut. Plus, he showed remorse. He promised to stop seeing the other woman and work on the marriage. She gave him another chance.

Such consideration is precisely what Janis Spring--a Yale University clinical psychologist and author of one of the most popular books on infidelity--preaches.

"Couples need to slow down and make sense of their intense feelings. I don't rate my success on how many couples stay together but on how many make thoughtful decisions," said Spring, whose book, "After the Affair" (HarperCollins, 1997), is in its 20th printing.

Spring's approach is sound, if not practiced often enough by marriage counselors, said Arthur Nezu, president of the Assn. for the Advancement of Behavior Therapy in New York.

Too many therapists hurry the process, he said. They are inclined,

especially when there are children, to patch up the marriage quickly rather than take the time to really look at the relationship.

"An affair is an indication that the marriage has an important set of problems," he said. "The best approach is for a therapist to try to understand everybody's side and develop a comprehensive assessment."

Although it is difficult to gauge infidelity, some experts estimate that partners stray in one-third of all U.S. marriages.

The overwhelming majority of couples choose to stay together in the wake of an infidelity, although there is a bit of a gender gap. When women discover their husbands have cheated, 83% decide to reconcile; 66% of men decide to stay with wives who've strayed.

Fewer men stay, Spring suspects, because men tend to be less forgiving. When women have affairs, they are more likely to be dissatisfied at home, so the marriage is in greater trouble to begin with. Women who are economically dependent on their husbands are also more inclined to stay, Spring said.

### **Taking the Time to Think It Through**

When Amy first suspected her husband, a 44-year-old financial analyst, was seeing another woman, she confronted him. But "he's a very good liar," she said. So she hired a private detective. "The day I confronted him with the hard evidence, I served him with divorce papers. Then I fell apart."

They talked and came to terms.

"I told him if he even wanted to consider keeping our marriage, he could not see [the other woman] at all, and he could not lie to me. If she called him, I wanted to know about it that day. He needed to keep me in the loop."

In less than three months, he lied again. (Lies do more damage to the relationship than the sex, experts say.) He told her he was working late, but later she discovered a car voucher showing that a driver had picked him up late that night at the other woman's apartment and driven him home. The divorce is now underway.

According to Spring, Amy behaved like many rational people in this situation. When she first learned of the affair, she thought it through and understood that people sometimes hurt the ones they love. She also understood it is possible they can learn and rebuild a relationship. But

when she suspected the problem was chronic, she moved on.

"It's not always crazy, weak or needy people who stay," Spring said.

Madhu, 28, comes from an Indian family who opposed her marriage three years ago to an African American man because they wanted her to marry within her culture and Hindu faith.

Cultural differences aside, he'd get pretty low grades as a husband by American standards: She's the primary breadwinner, and he hasn't held a steady job since they met. He is 38. He doesn't have a car, so he uses hers, leaving her to find her own way to work. He's had so many unpaid parking tickets that the car was recently booted. And now Madhu believes he's seeing another woman.

Still, Madhu hopes the marriage can work.

"I want to give him the benefit of the doubt," Madhu said. "In Hinduism, marriage is . . . sacred. Here everyone tells me to divorce him, that divorce happens every day." She conceded that she has no basis on which to trust him. "I believe marriage is a one-time thing. And I still haven't given him the best that I can."

Alan Oda, executive director of the Asian American Christian Counseling Service in Alhambra, said he is not surprised.

"There's a very strong taboo against divorce in Eastern cultures, which puts women whose husbands have affairs in a difficult situation," he said. "As Eastern societies become more westernized, that's changing."

### **'I Was Well on My Way to Forgiving Her'**

When it happened to Fred, a 43-year-old chief executive for an Orange County manufacturing company, he sought professional help. When he discovered his wife had taken up with the house painter, his first reaction was to "kick her out. My second reaction was to figure out why it happened, go to therapy and address our issues for the sake of the family and the marriage." They have two children.

When Fred found his wife's cell phone bill in December, which listed six to 10 calls a day to the house painter, he confronted her. She agreed to stop seeing her lover, go to counseling and work on the marriage.

"I was well on my way to forgiving her," Fred said.

Then two weeks ago, he found a prepaid calling card in her purse. All

the calls were to the painter.

"That was the last straw," he said. "I told her I wanted a divorce."

Currently separated from his wife, Fred said she "feels sorry now," but it is too little, too late.

He is almost certain he wants to end the marriage. But 1% of him wants to stay "because of the eight years together and our two children and because I want it to work, and because you just don't stop loving someone overnight."

When an affair is revealed, the hurt partner's self-esteem is often shattered. That partner becomes obsessed with details of the affair, which consumes all of his or her energy.

The unfaithful partner can't fathom the damage caused and goes through a slew of emotions: shame, and relief that the affair is in the open, but not necessarily regret.

"If they're honest," Spring said, "most will tell you they're not sorry they had the affair."

They'll say the lover made them feel alive when they felt dead--cherished when they felt neglected. Caught up in the deception of romantic love, unfaithful partners often have a tough time giving up the lover to come home to a relationship that's damaged, Spring said.

"The unfaithful partner's greatest fear is that they will never be forgiven; the hurt partner's greatest fear is that they'll never feel safe," she said.

If a couple decides to stay together after an affair, they must understand that some damage is permanent. Those who have been cheated on might have to accept that they will never completely trust their partners again or completely forgive. The goal is to trust enough and forgive enough.

Many reconcile for the "marital package"--family, friends and joint assets--even if they wish they were reuniting based on feelings of love. But those feelings often aren't there initially.

"That doesn't mean that feelings of love won't return, but it happens last, not first," Spring said.

The same goes for sexual intimacy.

"If you wait till it feels right, you'll wait out the relationship," she said. "As a general rule, we need to go beyond what we feel to the way we would like to feel in order to bring forward feelings of tenderness."

### **Romantic Love Versus Reality**

Committed, long-term relationships require hard work, she added.

"The problem with romantic love is that it's very deceiving. It gives you the sense that this person is so right for you and the relationship is so effortless. But that effortlessness only lasts so long. Disenchantment always sets in. True love is mature love that lasts the course."

Studies document that under the influence of romantic love, people's brains actually undergo physiological changes that make them willing to sacrifice everything for someone they barely know, Spring said. Those studies have also shown that it can take at least two years for those feelings to fade away.

Gerard, 48, is a successful Southland physician learning about romantic love the hard way. His third marriage, to the woman for whom he left his second wife, is on the rocks. He now doubts whether he's ever been in real love.

"It's unfortunate that magazines and movies are the way they are," he said. "I want to look longingly into my partner's eyes and say, 'I will never hurt you. I will never leave you.' I've said that, then I do."

During his first marriage--which lasted less than two years--he wasn't faithful. During his second marriage, which lasted 16 years, he estimates he had 10 affairs.

"There was not a lot of sex [in the marriage]. I didn't feel satisfied; there was no giving on her part. I probably should have left my marriage sooner, but we had two kids, and with the affairs I was getting my affection needs met," he said.

Gerard's last lover also wanted out of her marriage. They both divorced their mates to marry each other. (According to Spring, 10% of unfaithful partners leave their marriages and marry the lover.)

Now, after three years of marriage, disenchantment has replaced romantic love.

"We have different everything . . . different expectations, different backgrounds, different interests, different temperaments," said Gerard, who is starting to think about other women. "If I had another affair within this marriage, I wouldn't see any reason to have intercourse with my present wife, so why be married?"

Gerard has filed for divorce. Still, he's reconsidering.

"I'm not quite as confident in my ability to pull off another affair," he said. "I'm older."

More than anything, he said, he does not want to be alone.

"I'd love to settle down with one person and be truly in love, whatever that is, and have the respect and trust that goes along with that. I crave that, but I don't have it."

Spring said reconciliation isn't right for everybody. Sometimes trust and forgiveness aren't possible.

Still, she said, "extraordinary lessons can be learned from something as traumatizing as an affair. If people are willing to learn those lessons, they sometimes face important truths about themselves and for the first time understand what it is to love and be loved, and become more intimate partners and better individuals."

Spring will discuss infidelity issues at a six-hour workshop Saturday at the UC Irvine Medical Center in Orange. The cost is \$125. For information, call (949) 464-0131.

### **Mending a Damaged Marriage**

Yale University clinical psychologist Janis Spring recommends that if a couple wants to have a healthy reconciliation after one partner has been unfaithful, that partner should:

1. Give up the lover in no uncertain terms.
2. Work to earn back trust through daily behaviors that reassure the hurt partner.
3. Truly feel and demonstrate remorse.
4. Figure out why he or she strayed, working with a professional if necessary. If the unfaithful partner does not know, the hurt partner

can't feel safe.

5. Be willing to talk about the affair and allow the partner to express his or her hurt as often as that partner needs to talk. Typically, unfaithful partners don't want to talk about the affair. They'll say, "It's all in the past. Let's move on." But if hurt partners are ever going to move on, they have to talk about it. Spring remembers one woman telling her husband: "If I bring up [your] lover 10 times a day, please understand that I think about her 500 times a day, and I'm using incredible restraint."

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