

Why Do Affairs Happen? By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Most people believe in monogamous marriages. Most people believe that affairs are "wrong". Most people do not intend to have an affair and most couples never would have believed that it would happen to them. Affairs happen in the marriages of all kinds of people. Not bad people. Not people whose marriages are "doomed". Any marriage could be vulnerable to an affair.

One of the first questions that the partner asks when they learn of the affair is "why". Everyone spends a great deal of time on a daily basis trying to make sense of their lives. People develop hypothesis and personal theories trying to explain the behavior of others. This is especially true when others' behavior negatively impact them.

One of the first things targets of speculation for the offended party is the other person's motives. "Did s/he intend to hurt me?" "Was it all his/her fault?" "Is this a transient event or is this a personality characteristic?" "Will it happen again?" "Can life ever be the same again?" "Does s/he love the other person?"

Blaming is a predictable part of trying to figure out how they could happen. The offended party (and sometimes the unfaithful partner) will attempt to assign responsibility for this event. "This is not supposed to happen. Someone or something is at fault and to blame for this".

The betrayed partner might blame themselves--"I should have paid more attention to him/her." "I should have had more sex with him/her." "I should have taken out the trash when she kept asking me to do that." "I should have taken better care of my looks."

The faithful partner will blame the unfaithful party and try to identify the personality characteristics and other behaviors that set things in motion. "This is something you did to deliberately hurt me." "You flirt all the time. What did you think would happen?" "You should not have taken that new job." "I knew when you started working out, that something was up." The faithful partner will probably blame the other woman/man—"She had her hooks out for you from the beginning." "Everyone says that she is easy." "I'm sure that this is not the first marriage he has broken up."

Eventually they usually start looking at what was wrong with their own relationship. "If we had been spending more time together this would not have happened." "If we communicated more often and took vacations we would not be in this mess." They may blame the environment. "I knew when you started running around with the girls from the office that something like this would happen."

Individual factors, relationship factors, environmental factors, and third party factors are all involved in how an affair happens.

Relationship factors that might be involved include a general lack of attention to the relationship, lack of time and energy devoted to relaxation and fun in the relationship, lack of intimacy, lack of companionship, lack of emotional, physical, and other support, disregard for each other's feelings and needs, and ongoing conflicts . People in a relationship can be unavailable to each other for a number of reasons. One or both partners may not know how to do true intimacy. One may be addicted to substances or behavior (such as work addiction, gambling addiction, rage, etc.). One may be physically ill or taking medication that makes physical intimacy problematic. One may have emotional or mental illness that prohibits ability to be truly present in the relationship.

Individual factors could involve lack of self-esteem, insecurity, lack of feeling loved or valued in the marriage, vulnerability to flattery, impulsivity, novelty and excitement seeking personality traits, self-absorbed and/or entitled frame of reference, indifference to the partner or relationship.

Environmental factors could involve being in new environments where the anxiety and stress are up, where there is pressure to fit in, where others believe affairs are ok, where seductive behavior is accepted, where you feel that you need an ally, and where your partner is unavailable.

Characteristics of the other party also comes into play. The other man/woman in the affair may have presented himself/herself as a sympathetic victim needing rescuing, or as a strong potential partner who will fulfill unmet needs and fantasies that your marital partner has not done. The interest that they show you contribute to the unfolding of the events leading to the affair. For the unfaithful, they seem to see you as the person you want to be. They haven't heard all your stories, spiels, or soapbox theories and they don't see the warts, bad habits, and bad hair days that your spouse sees daily. They look at you with admiration and excitement. They may even have the same relationship dynamics with his/her spouse that you have with yours.

In other words, probably most of these factors have bits and pieces that have come together in a slice of time to create the right environment for infidelity to occur. When an unfaithful spouse says that they never intended for this to happen, most often, that is the truth. Its like the perfect storm, with various factors coming together at the right place, right time, in the right sequence, with specific vulnerabilities usually pre-existing prior to the event.

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