The Many Faces of Infidelity: Exploring the Causes and Treatment of Extramarital Relationships (4 hr)

Written By: Leah Walker, LMFT and Chad Hagans, Ph.D.

Learning Objectives:

- List demographic factors associated with increased risk of infidelity.
- Identify two individual characteristics that may play a role in the increased likelihood of engaging in an affair.
- Define what does and does not constitute infidelity.
- List the five different types of affairs.
- Compare and contrast the central argument between the moral view of affairs and the function of an affair from a relational perspective.
- Identify three considerations all clinicians should understand before working with a couple who has experienced an affair.
- Explain the three stages of treating an affair.
- List the six stages of recovery for the spouse of the sexual addict.
- Discuss the meaning of the “split self” in referring to the split-self affair.
- Outline the basic stages of treating the split-self affair.
- Identify four reasons why cyber-infidelity is an easy situation for some people to engage in.

Introduction and Case Examples

Julie and Craig

Julie and Craig were everyone’s idea of the perfect couple. All of their friends envied their relationship; their comfortable lifestyle; and their two athletic, smart, and attractive young children. Julie and Craig have been married for twelve years. Recently, during a time in which Julie was consumed with taking care of her mother who had cancer, Craig felt quite distant from her, but didn’t really know how to discuss this with Julie. Over time, Craig ended up having an affair with a woman from work.

Craig confessed the affair to Julie after he could no longer live with his guilt. Julie now feels old, undesirable, angry, and unloved. She tells her friend that she does not believe her marriage can survive this affair. Craig has a hard time explaining why he did what he did. He admits that Julie
is more attractive than the other woman is, and his sexual relationship with Julie is better than what he had in the affair. Craig is begging for forgiveness and promising Julie he will never do something like this again. Julie is not sure if she is even willing to go to couples counseling with Craig.

*Michael and Monica*

Michael and Monica have been married for fifteen years. During their marriage, Michael has had multiple affairs. Monica has been suspicious at different times, but Michael always denies when she questions him and Monica ends up believing his excuses. Michael estimates he has had at least fifteen affairs during the marriage. Michael has had short-term affairs that have lasted a few weeks, as well as several one-night stands. He justifies his behavior as acceptable because he does not get emotionally involved with any of the women and he still loves Monica.

Michael recently found himself in a situation that he cannot lie his way out of. A woman with whom he had a brief relationship has told him that she is pregnant and that he is the father. Michael knows it is only a matter of time before Monica finds out the truth. He does not know how she will react and he is now panicking over the situation. He is terrified that she will discover how many affairs he has had over the years. Despite his worries, Michael recently had another one-night stand, and feels that his behaviors have become beyond his control. Michael also views pornography for several hours each week and visits prostitutes on occasion.

*Celeste and Don*

Celeste has been married to Ron for five years. Celeste became close friends with a man who volunteered at the homeless shelter where Celeste works as a case manager. At first, Celeste found herself interested in this man, Dave, just as a friend. He seemed so willing to listen to her
struggles at work. He was very kind and compassionate. Celeste often found herself comparing him to her husband. Over the course of several months, Celeste began to realize that she was falling in love with Dave, as they began having lunch together regularly and texting each other multiple times per day. However, she and Dave never had a physical relationship, so Celeste did not feel as if she had been having an affair. Dave’s girlfriend, Donna, did not perceive the relationship with the same point of view as Celeste, and became very jealous of Celeste and Dave. Donna read the text messages sent by Dave to Celeste, and then called Celeste to tell her to stay away from him. Celeste now feels torn and believes that she is in love with Dave and wants to divorce her husband to be with Dave.

The words of Allen et al. (2005) explain the development of most cases of marital infidelity, noting that “generally speaking, people do not usually set out to have extramarital sex. The extramarital sex behavior is the result of an unfolding definitional process whereby a rationale for the activity is created over time” (p. 114). Extramarital affairs, whatever their cause or outcome, fascinate the American public. Politicians who are caught engaging in affairs receive tremendous publicity and speculation. Former Presidential candidate John Edwards, Eliott Spitzer, the former Governor of New York, and Anthony Weiner, a former member of the U.S. House of Representatives from New York, all had their political careers damaged by sexual scandals due to affairs. Celebrities such as golfer Tiger Woods have also been shamed publicly and had contracts for product endorsements pulled due an unfavorable public image that resulted from these affairs. Certainly the affairs of those in the public eye provide an opportunity to dissect the possible causes, as well as the outcomes. However, for every politician or athlete, there are hundreds of ordinary people who have affairs, which may or may not be known to others, but with no less serious consequences than those experienced by the likes of Tiger Woods
or Elliot Spitzer. The recent scandals involving the “Ashley Madison” website, which advertised dating services with the tag line, “life is short, have an affair,” catered to married people seeking affairs. Hackers infiltrated the site and released the email addresses of millions of members. Media outlets reported fears and concerns of married people, mostly men, who were terrified of being discovered, and some well-known people were revealed, such as reality TV personality Josh Duggar, from the show “19 Kids and Counting,” who had ironically built a career around the promotion of marriage and family values.

Dr. Frank Pittman, a noted therapist who studied and treated infidelity in couples for decades (1990), uses the terms infidel to describe the spouse who is unfaithful, and cuckold to describe the spouse that is cheated on. He noted that our culture “even as we fail to practice fidelity, we seem to believe that infidelity should not be tolerated” (p. 29). He cites examples from modern film, as well as the mythology of the ancient Greeks that illustrate the terrible punishments given to those who commit adultery, or at least portray the horrible heartbreak that results from such behaviors. “We can accept infidelity if the cuckold is presented as a monster, but adultery can’t be rewarded if both the infidel and the cuckold are good guys” (p. 30). He noted that in novels like Jane Eyre, Mr. Rochester can be a sympathetic character because his wife is considered insane. However, he must suffer greatly by going blind and losing his hand before the reader can fully justify his adulterous affair with the heroine.

We can see this played out in the media stories of the aforementioned politicians and celebrities who engaged in affairs. Their wives are portrayed sympathetically and as the victims of horrible men with no morals. John Edwards, the one-time front-runner for the Democratic Vice-Presidential race in 2008, was especially vilified for having an affair while his wife was fighting cancer, from which she later died in 2010. In any social group, affairs occur and
inevitably, people pick sides. Most people can recall learning about an affair involving a neighbor, family member, or church member, and then hearing a combination of comments ranging from “How could he do that to that sweet woman?” to “I can’t believe she had an affair. They seemed like the perfect couple,” to comments of “Do you really blame him? She is so mean to him.” Onlookers typically assume, guess, and dissect things based on of what they know. Often, they will then assign blame, but the multiple factors involved in affairs are hard to sort through, even for the couple themselves. Therapists who work with couples experiencing affairs often hear the phrase, “I don’t know how it happened” with many, if not most, of the couples.

Modern culture has provided a context in which people view romantic love, marriage, and affairs. The culture in the Western world portrays love as all consuming, full of passion, happiness that lasts forever, and few problems. People often expect romance and passion to stay at the peak levels that they experienced early in a relationship, and when passion slows down, couples oftentimes feel that something went wrong. They may then seek romance in outside relationships. It is a fact that passionate love does decrease in marriage over time (Hatfield & Rapson, 2008), but not everyone has an affair while married, so the desire to seek passion and romance in and of itself does not explain infidelity.

**Factors in Affairs: Demographics and More**

Humans are not simple, nor are relationships. To gain an understanding of affairs, and couples counseling for affairs, it is important to review several key studies that examine the variables of couples who experience infidelity in terms of their demographic characteristics, values, and personality traits. The implications found in the research regarding why affairs may occur give an increased level of understanding to the therapist working with these couples in the
aftermath of an affair. This course explores the characteristics of different types of affairs, including the increasing prevalence of cyber-sex and online affairs, as well as treatment approaches, as these different types of affairs present a need for somewhat different therapeutic interventions. Pittman (1990) noted that our culture holds many myths about affairs:

1. Everyone is unfaithful; it is normal, expectable behavior.
2. Affairs are good for you; an affair may even revive a dull marriage.
3. The infidel must not “love” the cuckold; the affair proves it.
4. The affair must be “sexier” than the spouse.
5. The affair is the fault of the cuckold, proof that the cuckold has failed the infidel in some way that made the affair necessary.
6. The best approach to the discovery of a spouse’s affair is to pretend not to know and thereby avoid a crisis.
7. If an affair occurs, the marriage must end in divorce (p. 34).

Pittman noted there is some truth in each statement, and everyone could point to examples that illustrated each of these myths, but overall these myths have been proven incorrect.

It is also important to clarify that the majority of available studies do not provide data for same-sex couples, nor do they include long-term couples who live together but have never married. These two groups are typically not a part of the literature surrounding infidelity, and thus, the studies and statistics quoted regarding infidelity usually only apply heterosexual couples in a legally recognized marriage. In addition, it is important to clarify the term infidelity, which may not mean the same thing to everyone. One person may consider the relationship between Celeste and Dave noted above as an affair, but someone else may not see it that way. In most of the studies cited, infidelity typically follows the definition used in the often cited study
by Atkins, Baucom & Jacobson (2001), which uses “the terms infidelity and extramarital sex to refer to sex with someone other than one’s spouse while one is married,” (p. 735). However, this course will later discuss internet affairs and pornography as newer forms of affairs that do not necessarily fit the classic definition of infidelity.

While most of the public scandals in the news have featured men as the straying spouse, and men are statistically still more often involved in extramarital affairs, recent studies indicate that women are having affairs at a rate that grew almost 40 percent from 2000 to 2010, to an overall rate of 14 percent of all married women. The rate for men over the same time period remained just about the same, at 21 percent. (National Opinion Center Survey, 2010). A recent study found that men and women are equally likely to pursue affairs for emotional reasons or sexual reasons, and there no notable differences in men and women’s motivation to have affairs if they were unhappy emotionally or sexually. (Omrzu, Miller, Schultz & Timmerman (2011). In American culture, men are often though to pursue sexual variety as a function of their evolutionary or biological impulses. Psychologist Suzanne Phillips writes, “Evolutionary theory, gender differences, stereotype, media myth and cultural expectations invite us to recognize that men have more sexual desire than women both in frequency and intensity, are wired to have many partners, have more difficulty with monogamy and that as such, married men are more likely to have affairs than married women.” (2013). Overall, this is not the case. Other studies indicate that men and women tend to have affairs for somewhat different reasons. Dr. Frank Pittman noted that men were more likely to admit to having sex with another woman, but deny any emotional attachment as part of the affair, but women tended to open up to the emotional aspects of the affair and minimize the sexual connection they had with another man, or deny that sex had occurred.
It is important to note that there are numerous variables involved in marital infidelity, including gender, but also the often-overlooked variables of education, marital satisfaction, opportunity, economic status, prior history of divorce, and religious beliefs. Atkins, Baucom, and Jacobson’s landmark 2001 study was the first to use sound methodological practices to investigate various correlates of affairs, such as those noted in the previous paragraph, using a model that studied each variable as well as the interaction of these variables. Marital happiness was an important variable associated with infidelity, in that respondents who characterized their marriages as “not too happy” were four times as likely to have had affairs as those respondents who described their marriages as “very happy.” Religious behavior was not associated with any differences in the rate of extramarital affairs. Respondents who attended church or other religious services weekly were just as likely to have affairs as non-religious people, if the religious person reported their marital happiness as “not too happy” or “pretty happy.” However, if a person was both religious and reported being “very happy” in their marriage, they were much less likely to have an affair than someone who was very happy and not religious. This interaction of variables provides an example of how affairs are not just the result of simple cause and effect, but also can lead to differences only when found in certain combinations. The authors concluded that religious values could enhance one’s marital commitment, but only when the marriage was described as very happy. Otherwise, it appeared that marital unhappiness outweighed religious values.

In addition, other variables influenced the rate of extramarital affairs. For example, being employed outside the home led to more affairs for both men and women, which the authors believed was an obvious reflection of the opportunity that the workplace provided. Income levels were also associated, with increased numbers of affairs for those with higher income levels.
People earning over $75,000 per year were 1.5 times more likely to have an affair than those earning less than $30,000 per year. The authors hypothesized that lower levels of income decreased the opportunity for someone to travel, for example, and meet someone with whom to have an affair, or to engage in social activities, such as going out with friends where one might meet someone. Respondents with higher education levels also engaged in affairs at a higher rate, as persons with graduate degrees reported affairs 1.75 times more often than someone with a high school education. One possible explanation for the education variable may be that more highly educated people have more liberal attitudes about sex in general. Other factors, such as a history of a previous divorce, was associated with someone being twice as likely to engage in an affair as a respondent in their first marriage, but the authors were not able to discern exactly why this led to more infidelity. Age at marriage was another variable that impacted rates of infidelity, with someone who was married at age sixteen being four times as likely to have an affair as someone married at the age of twenty-three. The authors inferred that this was the result of many teenage marriages beginning under difficult circumstances, such as unplanned pregnancies, and possible parental disapproval, which in turn led to more marital stress and less happiness, and thus more affairs. Men were more likely to report affairs overall, but the authors noted that among younger respondents, the gender gap was smaller.

There are also some interesting findings in regards to the interaction of gender and earnings that influence the tendency to have an extramarital affair. Munsch (2015) examined the effect of earnings on infidelity and found that in men who were not the primary breadwinners in a couple were more likely to have an affair. The author hypothesized that the lack of earning power and the dependence on one’s partner made the men feel threatened. Having affairs
allowed them to both emotionally distance themselves from their wives, and allowed them to compensate for their feelings of inadequacy.

Marital stability does appear to be a key variable in infidelity. A recent study discovered that marital violence, lack of time spent with a spouse, and marital instability all contributed to significant risks for an affair. However, greater religious commitment showed as a protective factor against infidelity in this study (DeMaris, 2009).

More recent studies found some similar findings regarding religion and relationship satisfaction. Mark, Janssen & Milhausen (2011) noted that religious beliefs had little impact on the rate of infidelity, but relationship unhappiness correlated with increased rates of infidelity for both men and women. In comparing men who engaged in infidelity with those who had not, they found that 72 percent of those who had affairs reported lower happiness in their relationships before having an affair, whereas among those who had been monogamous, only 47 percent reported lower levels of happiness in their relationships. Likewise, 67 percent of men who reported that they had lower levels of sexual satisfaction also reported affairs, but only 47 percent of men who were happy with their sexual relationships had affairs. Interestingly, for women, lower sexual satisfaction was not associated with participation in affairs. Relationship unhappiness was reported for 62 percent of women who had affairs. In those women who assessed their relationships as more happy, 40 percent engaged in an affair.

This study was somewhat unique in that the authors went beyond the oft studied demographic variables and values, and also explored the dimension of sexual satisfaction, as well as levels of sexual excitation, and sexual inhibition as factors in the tendency to engage in affairs. The authors also examined other factors they termed sexual personality variables. Using self-report measures, the participants were assessed for their tendency to engage in sex when
very happy or depressed, their rate of sexual excitation, their levels of performance inhibition while engaging in sexual activity, and their levels of inhibition related to the consequences of sexual behavior (i.e. being afraid to have sex for fear of getting an STD). In examining sexual behaviors for both genders, the study found a higher rate of affairs among men and women who have the tendency to engage in sexual behaviors when in either very positive or negative moods. These findings suggest that very positive moods could result in ignoring consequences of affairs, and negative moods influence people to seek solace in a sexual relationship. In addition, men who reported higher levels of sexual excitation did engage more often in affairs. No such increase in infidelity was found for women who had high levels of sexual excitability. However, both men and women participated more often in affairs when they ranked lower on levels on inhibition for consequences, and even more interesting, both genders had affairs at a higher rate when they scored higher in levels of sexual performance inhibition. As the authors noted, this finding may seem to not make sense at first glance, that more inhibited people would be more likely to have an affair, but those persons who experience inhibition in their primary sexual relationship may seek risky experiences, such as an affair, to increase their arousal and decrease their inhibitions.

Other studies have found that sensation-seeking plays a role in infidelity for both genders. Lalasz and Weigel (2011) found that there were no meaningful differences in men and women who engaged in affairs when the women had high levels of sensation seeking tendencies. Both men and women with high levels of sensation-seeking were significantly more likely to engage in affairs than those with lower needs for sensation-seeking.

Attachment styles have also received a good deal of attention in research studies of infidelity. Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall (1978) described three styles of emotional
attachment in relationships, which evolve during infancy as a result of the infant's relationship to caregivers. When an infant receives responsive parenting that meets his or her needs, the infant develops a secure attachment style to the mother or other caregiver. If the infant receives little response to his or her needs, due to neglect or a lack of responsiveness from the caregiver, the infant becomes avoidant and then detaches. The third type of attachment, anxious/ambivalent is thought to develop when the infant receives very inconsistent parenting from a caregiver. In adulthood, the three attachment styles play out in romantic relationships in different ways. Securely attached adults balance well between independence and dependence. Anxiously attached individuals cling, act needy, and fear abandonment. They often feel unloved and have issues with trust. Those with avoidant attachment style withhold their emotions, lack trust of others, and avoid being dependent on others for emotional support. (Collins & Read, 1990). Empirical support has been found in studies which supports the hypothesis that those who have an avoidant attachment style are more likely to engage in extramarital affairs. A meta-analysis of eight studies indicated that people with avoidant attachment styles had more permissive attitudes towards affairs, were more likely to perceive people other than their partners more positively than those with other attachment styles, spent more time seeking alternatives to their current relationship, and did engage in higher rates of infidelity over time. (DeWall, et al., 2011).

Another study found support for the role of avoidant attachment in infidelity. Fish, Pavkov, Wetchler, & Bercik (2012) found that adults with an avoidant attachment style were more likely to have affairs, but also found that people with an anxious attachment style were also just as likely to have engaged in affairs. The anxiously attached person’s need to be fused with another may be an influence on seeking affairs to fill an unmet need of emotional security in a relationship.
Overall, marital satisfaction does predict infidelity to a certain degree, and other factors such as religious beliefs may provide some decreased risk of engaging in an affair. However, it is important to note that combinations of certain factors are important as well, as noted by such researchers as Atkins, Baucom, & Jacobson (2001) who found that religious behavior also needs to be associated with high levels of marital happiness to create a lower risk of having an affair. In general, men are more likely to have affairs. Men who are financially dependent on their wives appear to more likely to have extramarital sex, as are more highly educated people and those with higher incomes regardless of gender. But demographics alone do not tell the full story, as other studies provide support for individual levels of sexual interest, sensation seeking, level of inhibition, and overall attachment styles also play an important role in who does and does not have an affair. The lack of exploration of individual factors helps explain why some studies have contradictory findings. For example, DeMaris (2009) found no relationship between rates of infidelity and sexual satisfaction in marriage. In contrast, Mark, Janssen, & Milhausen (2011) did find such a relationship existed in their sample when they explored personal characteristics as part of their study.

**The Definition of Infidelity**

Having examined risk factors for infidelity, it is then important to think about what constitutes infidelity, the impact of infidelity on a relationship, and how infidelity presents in different types of affairs. A definition of infidelity is not as simple as it would initially appear. Blow & Hartnett (2005) noted, “infidelity is defined in a myriad of ways and can compromise a number of activities including: “having an affair,” “extramarital relationship,” “cheating,” “sexual intercourse,” “oral sex,” “kissing,” “fondling,” “emotional connections that are beyond friendships,” “friendships,” “Internet relationships,” “pornography use,” and others (p. 86). A
study conducted by Vossler & Moller (2014), found that even couple’s counselors did not uniformly agree as to what constituted infidelity based upon the counselor’s experience in working with couples experiencing infidelity. The study did come up with a range of categories which were 1) sexual intercourse, 2) extramarital sexual activities, which included other forms of sexual contact, such as oral sex, or kissing someone outside the marriage, and 3) emotional betrayal, which could include “falling in love” or even friendships that placed an outside party over one’s partner, even if no sexualized behavior occurred. The first definition, sexual intercourse, was almost universally recognized as infidelity, except for those couples identified by counselors who had agreements to allow sexual intercourse with others, as part of an open relationship, or so-called “swingers.” It is interesting to note that for some of these open marriage couples, sexual intercourse was fine, but sexual behaviors such as kissing were considered infidelity. The second definition of sexualized behaviors created many issues with couples in treatment as a husband kissing another woman and denying it was a sign of infidelity, but the wife seeing the kiss as infidelity. The counselors noted in these cases that a frequently used argument denying infidelity was that no sexual intercourse occurred, so it was not really cheating. Other behaviors, such as going to strip clubs, viewing pornography, suggestive text messages, and online flirting also produced situations that were often viewed differently by partners, with one feeling betrayed and the other exclaiming that these behaviors were harmless.

Emotional betrayal was also hard to define, as spouses who engaged in these relationships would deny anything wrong was happening, and maintained it was only a friendship. Their partners, however, felt quite differently and believed the other was engaging in an affair. In most cases, the friendships were seen as emotional betrayal and infidelity when the involved spouse considered the friendship to be as important or even more important than the
marriage. Overall, any of the above behaviors were seen as infidelity when an element of lying or keeping secrets was present. Therefore, it is important for any counselor working with couples in the aftermath of infidelity to understand that the couple may not be in agreement over whether or not infidelity actually occurred and reaching an agreement about the infidelity may be the first step in treatment. One difficulty in treating couples after an affair involves the ambiguity of some of these affairs that are of the type described by DeMaris (2009) as the “other” types of sexual behaviors that exclude actual intercourse. Pittman (1990) noted, “this question of what is an infidelity, and what isn’t, is a surprisingly touchy one, as I discover each time I talk to either professional or nonprofessional audiences. I try to define infidelity, and describe it as best I can, and somebody will invariably come up to me, anxiously and sheepishly, and tell me about some experience, and ask for reassurance that this act was not infidelity….then others will take issue with me, pointing out that I had no business disapproving of whatever their activity, since it was quite natural for them, and they felt no guilt about it at all. Furthermore, I was being just like their former marriage partner in trying to impose my screwed-up values on an otherwise perfectly satisfactory life” (p. 19). Pittman noted that if both partners approve of the activity, and there is no harm as a result of it, then he would not define it as infidelity. Infidelity is, “a breach of trust, a betrayal of a relationship, a breaking of an agreement” (p. 20). Pittman goes on to describe interesting agreements that he had encountered in his practice, such as swingers who permitted each other to engage in outside sexual relationships, provided that the sex was done publicly with the full knowledge of each spouse, but private sexual activity with others was considered infidelity. There were couples who permitted homosexual liaisons for one or both partners, but considered a heterosexual sexual experience infidelity. He also described a very unusual case in which the wife could have affairs, but the husband could not, because finances
were an issue and the wife was concerned that the husband would spend money on the other woman. After decades of treating couples, Pittman determined that he had no concerns over what society considered to be right, wrong, or moral when it came to sexual and romantic behaviors, in or out of relationship. He determined that a simple test for infidelity came to this, “when a man asks me whether something is or is not an infidelity, I suggest he ask his wife. When a woman asks me if she has done something wrong in a certain situation, I reply that if she kept it secret from her husband, she must think so” (p.22).

Snyder et al. (2007) developed another working definition of infidelity which states that infidelity, “involves violating the expectations or standards of a relationship by becoming emotionally or physically involved with someone else” (p. 3).

A Typology of Affairs

The exact definition of infidelity will never be universally agreed upon by either clinicians or the public. However, moving forward with some type of consensus of a least a working idea of what infidelity is, it is important to consider how infidelity is then acted out in an affair. Emily Brown, author of Patterns of Infidelity and their Treatment, first published in 1991 and updated in 2013, describes several different types of affairs, each containing a different message. She notes the five types of affairs:

- Conflict avoidance—I will make you pay attention to me.
- Intimacy avoidance—I do not need you that much, so I’ll get some of my needs met elsewhere.
- Sexual addiction—Fill me up, I’m running on empty.
- Exit affairs—Help me make it out the door.
• Split self—I love my family, but I’m in love with my affair partner.

As Brown notes, all affairs at first have a similar beginning, stating “affairs are most alike in their early moments: exciting, compelling, with the thrill of the forbidden. With the typical one-night stand, the excitement is present, but there is little in the way of a relationship and the outcome may be guilt or simply relief at getting one’s fix. When emotional attachment to the person is part of the affair, its durability usually exceeds one night. Feelings that have been dormant spring to life. The affair is ‘our secret’ and little else seems as important. Risks are ignored or rationalized. The intoxication is so heady that the straying partner is blinded” (p.23).

Brown notes that affairs can last from one night to a lifetime, but the average affair lasts a few months to about a year, maybe two years. Frank Pittman also noted the failure of people having affairs to stop and think about the risks involved, stating, “Why, we must ask, would otherwise sane people, who buy insurance, who stop at traffic lights, who brush after every meal-risk everything in their lives for a furtive moment of sex” (p. 13).

Each type of affair expresses interactions between the spouses, and not just the behaviors or motives of the partner who has the affair. Conflict avoidance typically occurs early on in a marriage in couples who have problems discussing issues. The affair is a subconscious attempt by the straying spouse to bring attention to the unaddressed marital issues. Oftentimes, these couples are regarded by others as happy people with ideal marriages. Typically, the partners in these marriages have a hard time expressing anger towards one another, due to learning in childhood that anger was bad and should be avoided. Usually, the straying person feels a great deal of guilt, as well as bewilderment as to how they got into the affair in the first place.

In intimacy avoidance affairs, the affair provides a way for the straying partner to keep emotional distance and avoid feelings of vulnerability and neediness. Oftentimes, these couples
relate through conflict. Intimacy avoiders are more often men than women. Exit affairs are a way for someone to leave a marriage. Conflict avoiders tend to use the affair as a way to avoid facing the real issues in a marriage that they would rather not confront. The split-self affair is usually a long-term affair that starts as a friendship and then leads to the situation where the partner having the affair is torn between their spouse and their other relationship. The split-self affair is an emotional one that is intense and deep and can lead to high levels of guilt and anguish for the straying spouse. Oftentimes those who engage in these type of affairs have a strong desire to be moral, honorable, and do the right thing no matter what their real feelings might be. They are often the type of people who will stay in a miserable marriage because they made a commitment to do so, but along the way, they meet someone who awakens their repressed emotional needs for intimacy and love. The last type of affair listed is the sexual addiction affair. Sex addicts engage in compulsive behaviors related to affairs and will engage in sexual affairs of varying intensity. There is often little emotional connection in these affairs and sex addicts have an underlying set of issues that require intensive treatment, which will be explored in greater depth in the next section. Brown notes that the conflict avoidance affair is the most amenable to therapy, and the split-self affair is the most difficult to work with in couples.

Sexual addiction is a special type of affair. Some view the term sexual addiction as an excuse for having affairs and not as a legitimate mental health issue that leads to compulsive behaviors. Indeed, while the DSM-IIIR contained a diagnosis called “non-paraphilic sexual addiction,” a proposed diagnosis of hypersexual disorder was not included in the DSM-5 even after the researchers determined that hypersexual disorder was a valid diagnosis (Reid et al., 2012). In a follow-up study, Reid and Kafka (2014) examined why this occurred and concluded that politics, misinformation, and concerns that the disorder would be used as a defense in
criminal trials of pedophiles all led to the non-inclusion of the diagnosis. Carnes (2012) notes that “sexual addiction is not the same thing as infidelity. It is not a moral problem or an excuse to behave badly. Sex addiction progresses, gets out of control and becomes a progressive pattern and takes over the addict’s life” (p. 3). Carnes noted that sexual addiction meets the same criteria for addiction as alcoholism, noting that there is:

- Compulsive behaviors.
- Loss of control.
- Loss of time.
- Efforts to stop.
- Preoccupation.
- Inability to fulfill obligations.
- Escalation.
- Withdrawal.
- Continuation despite consequences.
- Losses.

Carnes notes that there is no universal agreement on who is and who is not a sex addict, the exact diagnostic criteria, and other technical issues related to this issue. However, most every therapist recognizes that certain people engage in risky and compulsive behaviors. If one chooses to use the term sexual addiction, or to call it something else, it creates a serious crisis in relationships.
The Impact of an Affair

Numerous studies have declared that infidelity is an event that results in the most damage in relationships (Butler et al., 2009) and is the leading cause of divorce (Butler, Harper & Seedall, 2009). Atkins, Marin, Lo, Klann, & Hahlweg (2010) found that the spouses of those who were involved in infidelity experienced increased symptoms of depression and traumatic anxiety after an affair was discovered. Indeed the traumatic symptoms present in many people after the discovery of their partner’s affair is recognized by many clinicians who offer trauma-based treatment (Baucom, Snyder, & Gordon, 2009).

Over the years, researches have noted the damaging consequences of affairs, and most recently, Blow and Hartnett (2005) noted feelings of abandonment, rage, mistrust, loss of confidence, and severe blows to one’s self-esteem. Nichols (1988) in his classic text, Marital Therapy, noted that affairs destroy the boundaries around the marital relationship and involve loss of trust. One of the most damaging aspects is the lying, and in particular “gaslighting.” This term comes from a movie of the same name, which describes a “deliberate attempt to mislead a spouse, to convince the spouse that he or she is imagining things, that he or she is “crazy,” that nothing is going on, when there is a factual basis for “gaslighting” (p. 187).

Treatment of Affairs

It is important to note that 50-60 percent of couples in treatment for the impact of infidelity seek to reconcile (Bargarozzi, 2008). These attempts are not always successful, but many of those who seek treatment do survive the aftermath of an affair.

Therapists do have different perspectives in treating couples who have experienced an affair. Brown (2013) views affairs as the result of interactions between spouses, whereas Pittman
(1990) tends to see the spouse who has cheated as the one who is responsible for their behaviors, and notes, “the victim of the affair is the marriage partner who is being betrayed, escaped and hidden from” (p.23). Pittman was known for taking a hard stance against excuses for affairs, in particular against the statement that many people make to justify an affair by stating that the marriage was not happy. Pittman’s oft-quoted response was, “those who expect marriage to make them happy are missing the point. Marriage is not supposed to make people happy; it is supposed to make people married, so they don’t have to date, and thus free to lead productive, useful, gratifying lives” (Pittman & Wagers, 2011).

Certainly, not everyone agreed with his statement, but he did note that affairs sometimes disrupted even so-called happy marriages. He noted that research had indicated that unhappiness was not necessarily a predicate for infidelity. He argued that when approaching couples in therapy after an affair, the question should not be, “How did your husband or wife make you have the affair?” Instead, the therapist should focus on, “How did infidelity…get into your repertoire of responses for stressful situations?”

Johnson (2011) made several compelling arguments regarding the different motivations for affairs between genders. He debunked the classic viewpoint that men seek sex and women seek intimacy. He notes, “If it’s true, then why don’t men just masturbate and why don’t women just talk on the phone, or exchange love letters with their boyfriends?” He notes that if it is just about sex for men, then why do they so often state that the mistress understands them and their own wife does not? He cautions against seeing affairs as moral struggles rather than as relational struggles. Though he does not call out Pittman by name, he criticizes the use of the terms infidel and betrayed to describe the involved and noninvolved spouses, which has been a hallmark of Pittman’s writings.
Johnson goes on to note, as does the work of Brown (2013), that the noninvolved spouse always plays a role in the affair. He also acknowledges that the noninvolved spouse is typically aware of the affair on some level. He also outlines the tendency of political wives, from the Kennedy family, to Eleanor Roosevelt and Hillary Clinton, to stay with clearly unfaithful husbands due to secondary gains from their political and social positions, which makes it difficult to see them purely as victims of an infidel. He encourages therapists to look beyond the surface of simple blame and portraying couples as consisting of a cheater and a virtuous partner. He cites not just politicians, but everyday people as examples, documenting stories of how spouses knew for years about affairs but chose not to mention it, for fear of disrupting the marriage. He relates other stories about spouses who deep down wanted out of a relationship, and who would set up their partner to have affairs so that they would have an excuse to walk away. He related a tale of a woman, Pam, who encouraged her husband to vacation with a female friend that Pam knew was also going through a vulnerable and difficult time in her own life. Pam then played the role of the betrayed spouse when her husband and the other woman gave in to their impulses and embarked on an affair. Johnson uses these examples, some of them rather extreme, to drive home the point that therapists need to avoid moral judgements about affairs, and to explore the function that the affair serves as a step toward healing in the relationship.

It is of note, however that such classic texts as Nichol’s Marital Therapy, and The Evaluation and Treatment of Marital Conflict written by Guerin, only devoted a section to marital infidelity and its treatment. A few years later, Private Lies, by Dr. Frank Pittman, in 1990, and Emily Brown’s 1991 book, The Patterns of Infidelity and their Treatment (updated in 2013), focused exclusively on affairs and intervening from a therapeutic standpoint. In the years that followed, other researchers added to the conceptual approaches of the treatment of infidelity
and focused more intensely on affairs as an especially difficult and traumatic aspect of family therapy.

**Affairs as a Secret**

Although the texts mentioned in this section were written decades ago, it is important to realize that the authors were recognized experts in the field of couple’s therapy. Their works contain information that no clinician should ever forget in working with couples, and they are critical to keep in mind. One of the most frustrating aspects of couple’s counseling comes about when an affair is kept secret from the therapist. Nichols (1988) discussed the phenomenon of secret keeping in marital therapy. He noted that oftentimes, the straying spouse kept the affair secret from their spouse as well as the therapist. Initially, when the couples already know of the affair, they do not always tell the therapist about it up front. Often, the couple waits until they feel enough trust with the therapist to reveal the information and work on the issue. Usually, however, the secret is kept by one person, and in the worst-case scenario, the person wants the therapist to also keep the secret from the non-involved spouse. Nichols declared this to be one of the worst situations for a therapist. He would typically let patients know from the outset, before such information was revealed, that he would not keep these types of secrets as a rule, and had to consider them on a case by case basis. He noted that if the information revealed was about an old affair that had since ended, that the issue may not need to be revealed, stating, “What is to be gained by confronting them about a nonexistent situation? Similarly, what damage may be done to the spouse by learning about an affair of the past?” (p. 185). In regards to being informed of a current affair, Nichols stated that “In my judgement, I consider it unethical and at best inequitable to continue to treat a couple while agreeing with one of the partners to withhold information about a current affair from the other for more than a brief period of time. Both
dynamically and ethically belong to the marital couple, not to the therapist and one individual” (p. 185).

Other clinicians have somewhat different viewpoints on secret affairs. Guerin (1987) felt that clients should understand that the affair must stop if any progress can be achieved in couple’s therapy, and they must realize that the person involved in the affair will experience real grief and pain that must be validated and treated in individual sessions. However, they were against ever revealing the affair to the spouse unless the spouse who was being gaslighted was becoming very depressed as a result, or began event to feel psychotic due to their feelings of knowing something was happening, but being told that nothing was going on.

Dishonesty is a frequent problem in treating couples dealing with an affair and its aftermath. Guerin (1987) also cautioned therapists working in these situations to be wary of ongoing dishonesty that would impact the course of treatment. The authors reveal a story of a married couple named Tony and Maria, and describe that Tony had been having an intense emotional affair with a women named Ellen. Tony readily agreed that he would give up his relationship with Ellen when he and Maria started working on the issues in therapy. However, it turned out that Tony lied to the therapist and his wife. He even pretended to feel distressed over the loss of his lover in sessions, and described the pain he felt over no longer having a relationship with her. Maria found Tony at Ellen’s home shortly after one of these sessions and he admitted he had never ended the affair at all. The authors stated, “Therapists need to be sensitive to the signs. If someone claims to have given up what was clearly an important attachment, with no difficulty and no sign of turmoil, the affair is probably still going on” (p. 73).
A Comprehensive Approach

One of the most comprehensive studies completed on a conceptual model of interventions aimed at couples was done by Baucom, Gordon, Snyder, Atkins, & Christensen (2006), which drew from the treatment models of forgiveness and trauma recovery, as well as insight-oriented therapy and cognitive-behavioral therapy. The steps are outlined here as a general approach to treating affairs.

In any type of intervention, the authors noted several considerations before working therapeutically with couples. The first consideration is psychopathology. People with antisocial behaviors or narcissism present a special challenge in therapy. When this occurs, therapists must inform the person’s partner of the implications of such personality traits and how this puts the marriage at risk for subsequent affairs. The partner of the person with these traits needs to understand that their spouse may “believes he or she is above social norms and mores… particularly if she or he is not remorseful or is inordinately defensive about the current affair” (p. 384).

The second consideration is what the authors call comfort with affect. In couples who dislike expressing a lot of negative emotion, they may just quickly move into forgiveness and want to skim over the real work of underlying causes for the affair, as they do not feel comfortable displaying anger, resentment, frustration, or other such emotions. Therapists must create a safe place for this negative affect to come out so that couples can resolve their conflicts and move on.

The third consideration concerns the couple’s level of commitment to the process. Therapists must realize that ambivalence in the early stages of treatment is not a sign that someone is not committed to the long-term success of the marriage, but that sometimes a person
must transition through that ambivalence to reach a point where they are ready to move forward. However, some people have a deep-seated fear of commitment owing to the avoidant attachment style discussed earlier. This avoidant attachment style will often require intensive individual therapy to prevent it from keeping the person from sabotaging the recovery process.

The last item is for the clinician to consider the pattern of affair that the couple has experienced. Obviously, an emotional and physical affair is more difficult to overcome than a one-night stand or brief fling. Furthermore, a first time affair is a much different scenario to overcome than is an affair that is one in a series of affairs.

The treatment approach outlined by the authors covers specific stages:

**Stage 1: Addressing the impact of an affair**

Assessment

The authors recommend that therapists hold a conjoint session to gather information about the couple’s romantic history, what events were taking place before the affair, how the affair became known, how the affair is impacting the couple, and their current weaknesses and strengths. Therapists also complete individual sessions, with an evaluation of the individual’s family of origin and how this impacts their view of marriage, their intentions regarding the marriage, as well as mental health issues that may need intervention, particularly if the individual is suicidal. The therapist should explain an important issue regarding confidentiality at this point. The therapist makes it clear that information that comes up in the individual sessions will not be withheld from the other partner. However, how this information is disclosed is done in consultation with the individual.
At the end of the initial assessment, a clinician should provide a couple with three things: 1) a basic overview of why and how the affair came about, 2) a current assessment of what problems a couple has currently and why they are occurring, and 3) a treatment plan. There are several other therapeutic goals at this stage: setting boundaries; self-care; time-out and venting, discussing the affair, and dealing with flashbacks.

Setting Boundaries: The first goal is to set boundaries. Therapists must help to restore a sense of safety to the marriage, which is difficult if a high level of conflict exists. The couple is encouraged to limit how and when they discuss the affair to control the negative emotional impact and unproductive arguing that typically occurs when the affair is brought up over and over. Otherwise, due to the tense and often hostile atmosphere that results, couples often find that the conflict about the affair spills over into all areas of the relationship. An example of this could be a couple who had no real issues in agreeing on child rearing suddenly finds themselves arguing about disciplining their children. Another boundary issue is the interaction with the third party. If the affair is over, it is obviously for the best, but this is not always the case. If the third party is a coworker, for example, it may not be possible to avoid that person. However, the couple may agree that seeing the third party is unavoidable, but having lunch together is unacceptable. The rebuilding of trust is key in the process, and couples need to establish and follow these boundaries.

Some clinicians are adamant that an affair end before a couple can be in treatment, Baucom et al., noted that commonly, the affair is not necessarily over when the couple enters therapy. It may seem to be a straightforward condition of therapy to have the involved spouse end the relationship immediately and then move forward with the necessary therapeutic interventions. However, it is not that simple in many cases. The involved spouse is oftentimes
receiving real emotional and physical gratification from the affair and is ambivalent about completely letting go, especially as they are aware that the marriage is in disarray and there is little, if any, feelings of support and love. The involved party knows that the marriage is in serious danger of failing, and they may be ending the affair for a marriage that may not make it anyway.

The authors caution clinicians against pushing the involved spouse too hard, which of course may be encouraged by the noninvolved spouse. The authors note that “Demanding that the participating partner terminate the outside affair relationship immediately and completely may prematurely precipitate that partner's decision to end both the therapy and their marriage” (p. 385). Certainly, the affair will cause issues in the treatment of the couple, but rather than demanding the affair end, the authors suggest that the therapist follow a three step process: “(1) Promote the participating partner's agreement to limit or suspend involvement with the outside person on an intermediate basis, (2) construct a tentative timeline for reaching a more permanent decision about whether to end the outside relationship, and (3) assist both partners in defining specific ground rules for how they will interact with each other, as well as with others outside their relationship (p.385).

In most cases, the noninvolved spouse is not going to be happy with the involved spouse’s ongoing involvement with the outside relationship, and the clinician must work carefully with the couple to guide them through this difficult situation. The therapist should try to help the couple reach an agreement of what is acceptable and what is not with the third party.
**Self-Care**

In order for the couple to be able to take care of themselves in the aftermath of the affair, they must care for themselves physically and spiritually, as well as seek out and utilize various forms of social support.

**Venting and Time-Out**

It is also crucial for the therapist to help the couple come up with a plan to walk away from each other when tensions in an argument become too intense. Therapists can help couples develop a plan that works for their situation, and to use the time-out constructively, as a tool to truly assist them in calming down.

**Discussing the Impact of an Affair**

The authors note that a noninvolved spouse has a real need to let the involved spouse know how they feel about the affair and what kind of impact it has had on them. However, the noninvolved spouse can take this to the next level and use it to try to punish the involved spouse. The involved spouse often has their own feelings of resentment and blame towards the noninvolved spouse that precipitated the affair, and is likely to use these feelings as a defense against the anger the noninvolved spouse directs at them. The couple then gets caught in a cycle of blame and anger. The therapist has the task at this stage to help the couple understand this cycle and the destructiveness involved with it. The couple is encouraged to write letters, which they first share with the therapist, who then proceeds to present them to the spouses as part of the therapeutic process.

**Flashbacks**

Flashbacks are a common occurrence in the process of recovering from an affair. The triggering event can range from a chance encounter with the third party, to an old receipt for a
hotel room appearing in a jacket months after the affair ended. It can also be more subtle, in which a current, seemingly innocent behavior triggers memories of the affair. The therapist should prepare the couple for the strong chance that some trigger will occur and instruct the couple on how to cope. The primary goal is to help the couple understand that they need to separate memories from current reality. The feelings aroused by a flashback need to be understood as a trigger of past emotions, and not as a reflection of the current state of the relationship.

**Stage 2: Examining Content**

Stage two contains critical therapeutic task to help the couple understand what led to the affair. This stage is usually the longest part of the treatment process. This stage is typically where couples can determine if the factors leading up to the affair are situation issues that can be solved, or more fundamental differences that lead them to feel it is best to end the relationship. The four areas involved are: 1) issues with communication or spending enough time together; 2) outside issues such as work stress, issues with extended family or money; 3) the involved spouse and his or her issues with marriage in general; and 4) the basic issues related to the noninvolved spouse as the clinician must help both parties to distinguish between blaming a noninvolved spouse for an affair, and understanding the role that each party play in setting the stage for the conditions for the affair to have occurred. The skilled therapist will work with the couple according to their communication skills and ability for insight. Some couples can discuss these issues well, with limited guidance from the therapist. Some couples are unable to hear the other’s story and will require the therapist to do more interpreting and stating of feelings for each partner. Therapists should aim to help each party reach a greater level of understanding for each other’s position.
Stage 3: Moving On

At this juncture in therapy, the couple needs to continue working on the mutual story of the affair, how it occurred, and the factors mentioned in previous section which played a role in the affair. Letter writing is again encouraged, as the couple writes another set of letters to each other with increased understanding of the many factors that were involved in the affair. Not every couple can work out the situation enough to reconcile. In some cases, reconciliation just is not possible, particularly if some factors leading to the divorce cannot be mitigated. It may be healthier for one or both of them to end the relationship. Forgiveness is also an important aspect of this stage. At this point, even if couples decide not to reconcile, the therapist should still encourage the couple to continue to work on reaching a point of increased understanding and forgiveness so that they can move on with their lives. If a couple is moving towards reconciliation, the components that led to the affair, such as work stress, or the strain of caring for aging parents, are addressed, and ways to prevent these factors from harming the relationship are discussed.

The approach outlined by Baucom et al. (2006), provides a good general model for treating affairs. However, other researchers have worked with certain types of affairs that have different elements involved that require special types of interventions, as they are particularly difficult to work with. Two of these types of affairs relate to sexual addiction, and what Emily Brown labels the “split-self affair.”

Treating couples with sexual addiction

Carnes (2012) discusses that the person identified as a sex addict needs to be managed in a specific way during the couple’s therapy process. Typically, without appropriate clinical intervention, an addict will engage in what she calls the “staggered disclosure.” She noted that
the addict will initially “1) deny everything, 2) disclose what they think they can get away with, 3) disclose a bit more, 4) get confronted as more comes out, 5) disclose all.” This pattern is not linear, and the addict will typically go back and forth and repeat some of these steps. Carnes noted that this pattern is very hard on the sex addict’s spouse, who develops even greater mistrust of the addict during this time, as the spouse is told by the addict that in effect, “I am really telling you everything. Then more surfaces. No, now I am really telling you everything.” The spouse never knows what to believe and always believes that there is more behind the story. Carnes favors a structured approach to disclosure after working with an addict at length in their own recovery process to reach a point where they are ready to fully disclose the extent of their behaviors.

Carnes characterizes the spouse of a sex addict as dealing with tremendous issues of guilt and shame, fearful of others knowing about the sex addict’s secret life, and helping the sex addict to keep the behaviors a secret. Spouses of the addict also blame themselves, believing if they were more supportive, more attractive, or more sexual, that the addict would not engage in these behaviors. However, in some cases, the spouse will be so angry that they will share the stories with others in an attempt to shame the sex addict, but they almost always regret this later. Carnes encourages couples to be discreet and to disclose the information only to selective people who will support the recovery process.

Carnes further describe the recovery process as a mixture of couple and individual work, for both members of the couple. The stages of recovery for the partner of a sex addict are:

- The developing stage in which the partner is either totally unaware of the addict’s behaviors, or suspected, but went into denial, did not trust their gut instincts, minimized
the behaviors as not really very important, sought couples therapy but did not address the sexual issues, or sometimes joined in the sexual behaviors themselves.

- In the crisis stage/decision-making stage, the spouse realizes the depths of the addict’s behaviors, usually after a serious event that exposes the addict and forces the spouse out of denial. The spouse seeks information by either snooping or asking questions; and goes into therapy, or attends twelve-step groups, forcing the addict to go to treatment, or thinking about or actually filing for divorce. During this time, if the addict is in treatment, the therapist facilitates a full disclosure process.

- In the shock stage, the spouse now knows and is obsessed with thinking about what has happened; feels victimized, angry, numb, very distrustful of the addict and fears that the addict will slip back into old behaviors. The spouse also typically demands that the addict be held accountable and can often feel self-righteous. The spouse in the shock stage spends a great deal of time trying to make sense of the addict’s behaviors.

- In the grief and ambivalence stage feelings of loss for what used to be, depression, more focus on the spouse and less on the partner, and ambivalence about the relationship occur.

- The repair stage involves making a decision about the relationship, increased understanding of the role played by both parties in the situation, setting boundaries, increased emotional stability, and working on issues from the family of origin.

- In the growth stage, feelings of being a victim lessen, focus on other areas of life other than just the addiction increase, and acknowledging that the process has actually had some positive outcomes for growth and awareness.
Carnes points out that these stages can go backwards and forwards and are not linear. In addition, someone with a history of trauma or of underlying psychiatric issues may have a harder time recovering from the issues involved in the process.

**The Split-Self Affair**

Brown (2005) notes that the split-self affair is “is made for TV: it has romance, suspense, civility-refinement, and just the right amount of drama” (p. 55). Brown describes these affairs as beginning as a friendship that turns into a serious love relationship. The involved is usually a man, and the wife is distraught, but ultimately believes her husband will choose her. The third party will cling to a belief that the man is going to leave his wife. Oftentimes, the wife and the mistress will engage in what Brown describes as “a waiting game, both tugging at the betraying partner with occasional well-mannered shots at each other.” Brown notes that most therapists really do not know how to intervene with this type of affair. She takes a similar approach to Baucom, et al (2006) in that being adamant that the involved spouse ends the affair immediately usually backfires and leads to the involved spouse leaving therapy.

Brown notes that the split-self affair begins in childhood, where the involved party is taught to do what is right regardless of how this affects them emotionally. The child struggles between doing what makes them happy and doing what makes others happy, such as acting as a parent to one’s own emotionally needy parent. Brown cites the example of Steve who had an alcoholic, unpredictable mother and a largely absent father. Steve never felt he got much attention from his parents. Steve gained attention from teachers and others by being a people pleaser, earning good grades and then as an adult, performing well in a demanding job. None of these things gave Steve any emotional benefits, but he did get attention for being a dutiful and responsible person. Steve married a woman who was nice and also not
very emotional. He subsequently began an affair with a woman much like his mother, as she was an alcoholic and an emotionally intense person. Through this relationship, Steve had his long suppressed emotional side awakened. In addition, it presented a chance for him to save his mother symbolically. Brown notes that the split-self affair is not about being torn between two relationships, but rather, it is about the internal split between a person’s rational and emotional sides. She writes “it is helpful to think of the affair as the unconscious recreation of a problem from childhood and an opportunity to resolve the underlying issue. The problem is not which partner to choose—it is the internal split…healing the internal split is essential to resolving the situation. Until the rational and emotional selves come together and are owned, any decision about ending the marriage or the affair is likely to be reversed” (p. 58).

Brown notes that the person engaging in this type of affair is likeable, easy to work with, and typically very controlled and calm. However, the therapist cannot be tempted to take the easy route with the client and must instead confront them and persist that they to tap into their emotional side. Brown goes on to state that this type of therapy is long-term and requires a great deal of individual therapy. She warns therapists to be prepared for the involved spouse to move in with the third party, then change his or her mind and return home to the noninvolved spouse. She encourages therapists to avoid getting caught up in the moves and the ensuing drama, but instead to continue to focus on the individual’s therapeutic need to resolve the split between the rational and emotional parts of themselves.

Initially, the couple will not understand any of these dynamics. The involved spouse will usually ask for help in choosing the outside partner or the spouse. Brown outlines the therapy involved as requiring both an examination of the person’s past to understand the dynamics that led them to have the split between the emotional and rational selves and then to heal this
split. She acknowledges that it is difficult to move the involved spouse past general
statements about their feelings and to get them to report real emotions. A good family history
is vitally important, and she suggests having family members help give the information if
possible. In gathering the history, she guides the therapist to ask questions to elicit emotions
that the involved spouse felt at key moments, such as when someone important died, or when
parents got a divorce and how the person dealt with these emotions.

If the therapist can work with the involved spouse to the point where he or she can
express emotions, acknowledge these emotions, and begin to get honest about them, even if
the emotions are not received positively by others, then the person is ready to discuss the
affair openly with his or her spouse. At this point, the split-self person will often choose to
end the affair, and many people benefit from living alone. If they have the willingness to
continue in therapy, people can begin to learn to make their own choices, based on what they
need and feel, rather than seeking to please others. People may take up new hobbies or
explore new careers. Brown believes that to heal their splits fully, most people require two
years of therapy.

Brown also discusses the need to work with the noninvolved spouse. Typically, the
noninvolved spouse wants to make the marriage work, and the noninvolved spouse’s
willingness to wait and fight for the marriage does not make sense to friends and family, and
even to some clinicians. Brown notes that some clinicians encourage the noninvolved spouse
to file for divorce and not wait while the involved spouse goes back and forth and acts
ambivalent. The noninvolved spouse will require individual work as well. Brown states that
the noninvolved spouse may typically have a history of abandonment and loss in his or her
life, and the outlining of a family history can provide this insight. The noninvolved spouse
typically presents as obsessed with the affair, and part of the individual work is for the therapist to encourage her to focus more on inner processes. It is often difficult for the noninvolved spouse to see what role he or she played in the affair. The noninvolved spouse will usually see the affair as the other person’s problem and not understand that they also need to do a great deal of individual therapy.

Brown believes that conjoint therapy should only begin once each of the spouses has reached a point where they have worked on their internal splits and have made a decision to work on the marriage.

Cyber-Affairs

Internet affairs pose an interesting situation for couples, and for couple’s therapists to deal with. The availability of these types of affairs pose an incredible amount of opportunity for both men and women to become involved in interactions that typically involve sexually suggestive messages and pictures being exchanged, and even mutual masturbation through webcams. Some participants deny these behaviors are really affairs because there is no physical contact and they never actually meet one another. However, many of these affairs have an emotional connection. Also, even when the cyber affair is purely sexual, the impact on one’s spouse can be just as devastating as an in-person affair. Schneider, Weiss, & Samenow (2012) also reported that engaging in online affairs and other cybersex activities cause a person’s partner to feel insecure, in need of help for the relationship, and to exhibit feelings of trauma, just as in a “real” physical affair. Indeed, Mileham (2007) noted that about one-third of all divorces now include allegations regarding cybersex activities and/or online affairs.
The internet has opened up a whole new lens on the issue of infidelity. Atwood (2011) describes internet activity as somewhat difficult to understand in traditional ideas of infidelity because it occurs in the cyber world. Her working definition on internet behavior that reaches the threshold of infidelity is drawn from the work of Shaw (1997). She writes that it is, “described as an infidelity that consists of taking energy of any sort (thoughts, feelings, and behaviors) outside of the committed relationship in such a way that it damages interactions between the couple and negatively impacts the intimacy in the relationship. This is based on the assumption that anything that is deliberately hidden from a partner can create emotional distance that could present a serious problem in the relationship.” The involved person who engages in internet infidelity develops a pattern of lying about the activity, decreases communication with the noninvolved spouse, decreases sexual activity with the spouse, and devotes less time to the family in general. It becomes a distraction to everyday issues. Atwood notes it is much easier to go online and find emotional support from strangers than it is to face real issues in a marriage. People who participate in cybersex fall into three categories: recreational, at-risk, and compulsive. The compulsive user can be obsessive, and at times, this progression happens rapidly.

Cyber-flirting is the first level of cybersex. Users may chat online, through the use of instant messaging. Cybersex involves the exchange of sexually explicit conversations and videos or pictures. For some, this cybersex takes the place of sex with their spouse. However, at this stage, most users believe that it is not affecting their relationship with their spouse as it is not real. Cyber-affairs result when the two people involved begin to have an emotional connection. They may spend hours chatting back and forth or writing emails. They may speak on the phone, and it may even progress to meeting in person.

The cyber world easily promotes these kinds of affairs for several reasons:
1) Cyber-infidelity is anonymous. The privacy of this forum allows people to open up to others with little fear of getting caught. It is also easy to pretend to be different by hiding behind a facade that would not be available in a face-to-face exchange in a bar, for example.

2) Cyber activity involves a great deal of projection. Users can easily project an ideal self from a computer screen and others can see and believe what they want about the other person. Indeed, “the other person is not seen or heard; they are a shadowy figure, a screen, or backdrop onto which any variety of transference reactions can be launched.”

3) Those with intimacy issues are attracted to cyber-sex and cyber-flirting. The basic issues that keep them from fully connecting to their spouse makes the seemingly quick and easy intimacy of cyber relationships attractive.

4) The tendency for people to engage in triangulated relationships as a way to reduce tension and anxiety within a relationship is a well-known phenomenon. For some people, the object of the triangle may be children or a job. The lure of the internet is that it offers a 24/7 way to reach out to others to flirt anonymously, to achieve this type of tension reduction in an almost effortless way, and to greatly increase a person’s ability to engage in these triangles.

5) Problems or frustrations that would normally be discussed with a spouse become easier to share with other users behind a computer screen. When a couple lacks communication skills, it is much easier to reach out and chat on instant messaging and emails to complain than it is to have a face-to-face encounter with a spouse to work on issues.
One of the most prevalent issues in working with couples who present in therapy is for the noninvolved spouse to question the grounds for their concerns. The spouse may question the legitimacy of the affair because it takes place in a virtual atmosphere. Of course, many times, the involved spouse encourages the noninvolved spouse to view the cyber-infidelity as make believe or not real. The involved person may accuse their spouse of having an overactive imagination or even of being unbalanced. As the involved person become more involved with the cyber world, they often ignore their children, withdraw from family activities, and disengage from sexual activity with their spouse.

Cyber affairs require the same type of therapy as “real” affairs, but with a couple of important distinctions. The therapist must not brush off the cyber-affair as any less real and damaging to a marriage than a physical affair. Noninvolved spouses feel betrayed, angry, and suffer the same loss of self-esteem as spouses in other types of affairs. In treating the affair, the therapist needs to work on the typical elements of “real” affairs with an exploration of the underlying causes, opening up communication and rebuilding trust.

Conclusion

Multiple factors influence a person’s decision to enter into an affair. Certain demographic characteristics and personality trait trends exist, though some researchers question many commonly held assumptions. Cyber-sex and online affairs are a relatively new area of knowledge for therapists, and the field’s understanding is still rather limited. However, therapists must treat these affairs with the same level of seriousness as an in-person affair. Therapists will
continue to encounter situations that are new and uncharted territory as the years go on that challenge the long-held beliefs and practices in therapy related to infidelity.

Therapists will likely never see eye to eye about factors involved in an affair and how to properly treat couples. However, the work of numerous researchers can provide a solid framework for therapists working with couples facing this very difficult situation.
References


The Many Faces of Infidelity: Exploring the Causes and Treatment of Extramarital Relationships (4 hr)

EXAM

1. A cuckold is a term used to describe a _____.
   a. Person who is cheated on.
   b. Pattern of infidelity.
   c. Type of affair.
   d. Coping skill.

2. An affair may revive a dull marriage is an example of a/an _____.
   a. Therapeutic intervention.
   b. Marital legacy.
   c. Myths about affairs.
   d. Bowen’s family theory.

3. Women are having affairs at a rate than grew almost _____ percent from 2000 to 2010.
   a. 10
   b. 1
   c. 75
   d. 40

4. Being employed outside the home led to more affairs for _____.
   a. Men only.
   b. Both sexes.
   c. Women only.
   d. Was not a factor.

5. ______ seeking plays a role in infidelity for both genders.
   a. Romance.
   b. Attachment.
   c. Thrill.
   d. Sensation.

6. Persons who cling, act needy, and fear abandonment are believed to have this type of attachment: _____.
   a. Avoidant.
   b. Secure.
7. Individual levels of sexual interest, sensation seeking, level of inhibition, and overall attachment styles play a role in _____.
   a. Who does and does not have an affair.
   b. Recovery from an affair.
   c. Sexual response cycles.
   d. Overall communication styles.

8. The following types of people are more likely to have affairs EXCEPT _____.
   a. Those with higher incomes.
   b. Those more highly educated.
   c. Men who are financially dependent on their wives.
   d. Older women.

9. According to Vossler and Moller, oral sex, or kissing someone outside the marriage are examples of _____.
   a. Harmless outlets for sexual frustration.
   b. Extramarital sexual activity.
   c. Emotional affairs.
   d. None of these.

10. Conflict avoidance and intimacy avoidance are types of: _____.
    a. Affairs.
    b. Love styles.
    c. Communication.
    d. Courtship.

11. “Violating the expectations or standards of a relationship by becoming emotionally or physically involved with someone else” is a definition of infidelity from _____.
    a. Snyder et al.
    b. Brown.
    c. Baucom.
    d. Pittman.

12. This type of affair is a subconscious attempt by the straying spouse to bring attention to the marital issues that are not addressed.
    a. Split self.
    b. Intimacy avoidance.
    c. Entitlement.
    d. Conflict avoidance.
13. A split-self affair is usually _____.
   a. Short term.
   b. Based in friendship.
   c. Is not very emotionally involving.
   d. Results in little guilt for the straying spouse.

14. Loss of control, loss of time and efforts to stop are all part of ______.
   a. Sexual addiction.
   b. Split-self affairs.
   c. Infidelity.
   d. Compulsive affairs.

15. For couples in treatment for the impact of infidelity, reconciliation is the goal of therapy what percentage of the time?
   a. 10-20 percent.
   b. 50-60 percent.
   c. 75-80 percent.
   d. 1-5 percent.

16. “Marriage isn’t supposed to make you happy…it’s supposed to make you married” is attributed to _____.
   a. Emily Brown.
   b. Frank Pittman.
   c. Bowen.
   d. Freud.

17. Nichols stated it was unethical to _____.
   a. Continue to treat a couple while agreeing with one of the partners to withhold information about a current affair.
   b. Ever reveal an affair to the uninvolved spouse without consent.
   c. Remain neutral in couple’s therapy.
   d. Align with the involved spouse in an affair.

18. Psychopathology and comfort with affect are _____.
   a. Considerations before therapy.
   b. Part of sexual addiction.
   c. Reasons for affairs.
   d. Patterns of infidelity.
19. Forgiveness and trauma recovery are two components of the therapeutic model attributed to _____.
   b. Vosser & Moller
   c. Baucom, Gordon, Synder, Atkins & Christensen
   d. Munsch.

20. Flashbacks is a component of which stage of treatment per Baucom et al?
   a. Stage 1.
   b. Stage 2.
   c. Stage 3.
   d. Stage 4.

21. Staggered disclosure is NOT recommended as an intervention by _____.
   a. Snyder.
   b. Pittman.
   c. Brown.
   d. Carnes.

22. Shock and growth refer to _____.
   a. Stages of recovery for spouses of sex addict.
   b. Types of affairs.
   c. Stages of intervention.
   d. Causes of infidelity.

23. The split-self affair _____.
   a. Begins in childhood.
   b. Results from internal sexual conflicts.
   c. Is an outcome of anxious attachment.
   d. Happens mostly in people with a history of prior divorce.

24. About one-third of all divorces now include allegations of _____.
   a. Spousal abuse.
   b. Cyber-sex or other online infidelity.
   c. Emotional betrayal.
   d. Same-sex affairs.
25. In the cyber world, problems or frustrations that would normally be discussed with a spouse become easier to share with _______.
   a. Coworkers.
   b. Extended family.
   c. Support groups.
   d. Other users behind a computer screen.