

THE CHEATER METER

I will never forget the words of a nurse friend named Ann. We were eating mozzarella-topped salads as I bemoaned my husband's unfaithfulness and ultimate rejection of me. I voiced all my theories about why he cheated, deep down scared to death that I somehow deserved it.

She said, "I think infidelity is a character issue." I almost choked on the simplicity of her words. As an infidelity therapist, I had gotten used to exploring the roots of a person's behavior, which often led to excusing it.

Despite all my training and years steeped in self-help literature that seeks to explain people's behaviors in morally neutral terms, I have come full circle to believe that people who engage in affairs have significant holes in their character. There is no excuse for an affair. But there are reasons why a person cheats. And they all relate to character.

I have a few theories about this character disorder called infidelity. Some of my ideas are based upon actual research, some are shaped by others' theories, and others are based upon my own observations.

Most of us who've been betrayed spend thousands of obsessive hours trying to figure out why our partners were unfaithful. We blame their parents. We blame our culture. We blame the lover. We blame our spouse's friends. However, even when we superficially strain to hold our betrayers responsible for their own actions and spread the blame around to a few others, *we secretly suspect it was all about us.*

WHY DO BETRAYED SPOUSES BLAME THEMSELVES?

1. **We cannot control others' behaviors.** Because we know we cannot change or control others. Therefore, we resort to changing and controlling ourselves. If we can discover that golden key to what we did to drive our spouses into their lovers' arms, we can prevent further betrayal and hurt by a future partner. Blaming ourselves for our partner's unfaithfulness gives us an illusion of control and a way to prevent further rejection.

2. **False notions.** Due to the false notion that if we beat ourselves up enough, we can atone for our failings. And, since our spouse has left and we can't beat him or her up, we rail on ourselves. Again, it gives us a whipping post with which to flog ourselves.
3. **Self-blame.** Perhaps if we hold ourselves responsible, we will feel less awful about what our partner did to us. After all, if we deserved the rejection, maybe we would, in a convoluted way, not be so angry with them. And then perhaps the pain will ease. Of course, this doesn't work. It only makes us feel worse.
4. **Inner shame.** The old "imposter" syndrome plagues us all in varying degrees. "If they really knew me and saw me deep down for who I really am, they'd shrink away in horror." So, when we are rejected, we may jump to the conclusion that our partner saw us for who we are and couldn't take it. Our secret fears have come to pass.
5. **Lack of self-worth.** Our partner's affair dealt an even larger blow to our sense of worth. "He/she must have found someone else because I am so loathsome." And, to make matters worse, the more we looked to our partner for validation of our worth and identity, the more devastating the blow when our partner strays and leaves. Although we fight this tooth and nail, our deepest fears are realized when a partner strays and leaves. We believe we are unworthy of love.

We tell ourselves the lie, "If I was more _____ (perfect, sexy, loving, appealing, worthy, lovable, adequate, strong, etc.) he/she would not have strayed."

How do betrayed spouses counter this tendency to bear inappropriate responsibility for the choices and wrong behaviors of their most intimate partners?

We need to face the fact that we did not and cannot force another person to have an affair. Even at gunpoint, your spouse probably couldn't perform if it wasn't in his or her heart to stray. You are simply not that powerful. Like psychiatrist Frank Pittman, III says, "It is very difficult to force someone to have an affair if they don't want to." [1]

No one can fall in love with another person against his or her will. No one can have an affair without engaging in an affair. In other words, he or she managed to betray you because he or she chose to. He/she made a decision and acted upon that decision.

You are dealing with an adult. He/she crossed the line on his/her own. You do not have enough clairvoyance to plant unwanted thoughts into another person's brain. Neither do you have enough power to drag him/her over to another person's house and force him or her to do something he/she does not wish to do.

I know plenty of unhappily married people who do not cheat on their spouses. They might swear. They might pout. They might find a lot of other ways to take out their frustrations, but having an affair is not in their repertoire. Why not?

Because it simply is not in them.

Infidelity for such persons is out of the question. It would go against their moral grain and the sensibilities of their consciences.

If your partner cheated, ask yourself this question: "Would I have done the same thing in his or her shoes?" If not, ask yourself, "Why not?"

A friend of mine named Jerry is a perfect example. He is a kind, loving, easy-going, but principled man.

His former wife was a very unhappy person. The more she tasted the things of the world, the more she wanted. She reconnected with an old boyfriend from high school and announced she no longer loved Jerry. She put him down, refused to join family functions, berated him for his faith, and demanded he leave his pastorate if he wanted to keep her (which he did). She decided to stay. After many roller coaster years she succumbed to the advances of her boss and slept with him. She snuck away for trips with him, lying to Jerry about where she was going. After 25 years of marriage, they divorced, and she took a new job. She then began an affair with her new boss.

Now, given the way she treated Jerry, logically it should have been him who had the affair. After all, he was the one being mistreated in the marriage. But, he did not. Why? Because it simply was not in him to do so.

Certainly, many betrayers do not go hunting for an affair of the heart. They usually fall into the trap of a romantic tryst through a friendship at work or in the neighborhood. But, believe it or not, not everyone who has the opportunity to cheat walks through that door. Some people have good boundaries when it comes to acting on their emotions. Some do not.

Even though I describe infidelity as a character issue, I do not see betrayers as intrinsically more evil than anyone who is not unfaithful. We are all capable of doing really sinful, hurtful things to ourselves and others.

However, the act of unfaithfulness rains down such evil upon its victims that only a character-disordered person would plow straight ahead despite the consequences. Such persons have dropped their guard and either invited a chink in their moral armor or allowed a crack in their foundation to grow. If they ignore it and do not seek repair, they bear personal responsibility before God for the devastation that eventually comes to everyone damaged in their wake.

The reasons why people engage in affairs must first begin within the persons themselves. The Bible says, "Guard your heart with all diligence, for out of it flows the issues of life." Betrayers have failed to guard their hearts.

For the sake of those of us who tend to accept improper blame for a spouse's affair, I am including some of the factors, proven or theorized, that make an individual susceptible to infidelity. Altogether, they comprise what I call "The Cheater Meter".

THE RESEARCH

A History of Unfaithful Behavior.

One of the highest predictors of unfaithful behavior is a history of unfaithfulness. That means if your partner cheated on you before (either early in the marriage, while engaged to you, or when living together before

marriage) or if he or she cheated on a prior partner, he or she will have an increased tendency to cheat on you in the future.

Ask yourself, “What was my unfaithful partner’s pattern in prior committed relationships? Was he/she unfaithful in any way, such as kissing, flirting with, confiding in, or romantically entangled with another person outside the relationship?

Repeating performances are especially common if the cheater did not experience severe consequences the first time. If a person gets away with cheating once, he or she may not be deterred from cheating again. That is why I always recommend fast, hard, and furious consequences for a first occurrence, if the faithful spouse wants to save the marriage. A tepid or appealing response sends a cue to the offender: “You can cheat on me with little recourse.”

Promiscuity.

Another predictor of potential unfaithfulness is sleeping around before marriage. The more sexual partners a person has before marriage, the more likely he or she is to cheat in a marriage. A breakdown in social mores before marriage can lead to increased permission to break the rules despite the bonds of marriage.[2]

Parental Influence.

According to research by Bonnie Eaker Weil, 80% of people who commit adultery had a parent who committed adultery, even if the adult child was unaware of it growing up. While this statistic appears high, I must admit I have found a high correlation between cheating parents and cheating offspring in my own practice. I often find that once a person admits his or her unfaithfulness to his or her parents, the cheater discovers or remembers that one of them was secretly unfaithful to the other parent at some point.

My theory is that parents who cheat have traits that they pass down to their kids – like avoidance of conflict, an attitude of entitlement, disrespect for the opposite sex, narcissism, and deceit.

Avoidance of Conflict.

Emily Brown, a well-known theorist in the field of infidelity research, has identified five kinds of affairs in vulnerable marriages, one of which is the “Conflict Avoidant” couple.[3] Rather than share their feelings openly and deal with conflicts in a direct, authentic manner, one member of the marriage may find it easier to re-route their frustrations through the avenue of an outside liaison. For example, a secretly angry partner may either find solace in an affair or drive the other partner to seek solace in the arms of another. When people are anxious about dealing with their problems within the marriage, they may seek the stabilizing comfort of confiding in an outside third party.

Attitude of Entitlement.

Dr. Shirley Glass has uncovered evidence of an entitlement mentality among many unfaithful partners. She reports that the higher the income, the less the accountability for time, and the more esteemed the work position, the greater the chance for unfaithful behavior. How often have you read about CEO's of large companies who were finally fired for cheating one too many times?

Most people who are unfaithful believe they are entitled to stray. They believe they are somehow more special, more able to get away with indiscretion, and have more rights than others, particularly the betrayed spouse.

This attitude becomes especially apparent when both partners have strayed. I can't tell you how many couples in my office fight over whose infidelity was more justified or less awful. Each one who was unfaithful believes that he or she had more of a “right” to cheat than the other.

Disrespect for the Opposite Sex.

It takes a lot of disregard for one's spouse to stop caring about the implications of one's bad behavior upon the other. Intimate betrayal is the ultimate act of disrespect for a spouse.

If your partner was raised by a father who had little regard for women, your spouse learned a lesson: do as you wish with or to women, without worrying about how your actions will affect them. Cheat on them. Abandon them. Use

them. Dismiss them. Whatever. Women are not worth protecting and being faithful to.

Or, if your spouse had a mother who treated her husband with disdain, your wife may act out her own disdain for you by having an affair. I had one female client who cheated on her husband of eight years. As we explored her history, I was struck by her own mother's cavalier attitude toward men and marriage. Her mother had had at least forty serial lovers over the years, and often advised her daughter to avoid the "trap" of marriage to a man.

Narcissism.

As Sandy Hotchkiss points out in her book, *Why Is It Always About You?* we live in a narcissistic culture. The "Me Generation" has grown into the "Me-First-And-To-Hell-With-Everyone-Else Generation," much to the destruction of our families.

The term "narcissist" comes from the Greek myth about Narcissus, who fell in love with his own reflection while gazing in a pool of water. Psychologists adopted this term to describe the personality disorder of a person who is completely self-absorbed. Many books have been written on the topic of narcissism, and most clinicians find such people very difficult to treat. They are unconsciously self-loathing but outwardly so self-consumed that they see everyone and everything else as extensions of themselves and for themselves.

A true narcissist comes across as a braggart, grandiose, and unable to get into another person's shoes. He sees the world through his own eyes alone. No one else factors into his heart or thinking, apart from serving his selfish needs and desires.

Most narcissists become so skilled at bewitching people into their adulation that they have what is called "narcissistic charm." Like a snake charmer, they woo others into worshipping them, but like the snake, their bite is filled with poison. If you cross them, they can be heartless and cruel.

Clinicians characterize many child sex abusers as narcissists. They charm and woo their victims with only self-interest in mind, and are so self-absorbed that they rationalize that the child actually likes being sexually abused.

All of us have a degree of selfishness in us, but people with more narcissistic traits are more prone to meet their own needs at the expense of others' well-being and happiness.

How often have you heard a straying spouse say, "I'm tired of living for everyone else. I need to put myself first for a change!" The trouble is, the person who says this has usually lived for himself or herself for a very long time, without admitting it. Even those who spent their early lives trying to serve or perform for others did so out of a self-centered need for approval or acceptance. Rarely does a genuinely altruistic person cheat. Only those pretending to be altruistic break out of their artificial molds via the avenue of an affair.

I believe that most cheaters have a selfish streak in them that needs to be broken. Even if childhood trauma contributed to an unfaithful person's poor coping strategies as an adult, the choice to engage in an affair is still a sign of unhealthy self-consumption.

While many disloyal partners continue on their self-centered path, I have witnessed a number of adulterers who have greatly humbled themselves once they came to their senses. They were willing to do the hard work of recovery, which included examining and undoing the roots of their self-absorbed ways.

While narcissists come in a variety of degrees and packages, those with the true personality disorder have a grim prognosis.

Inner Discontent.

There are a lot of reasons why people are or become discontented.

a. **Perfectionism.** People who are particular are difficult to please. They constantly look to others to fill their void of what they see missing in themselves. Unconsciously, they feel inadequate. They can only find relief from their own ruthless self-scrutiny when they scrutinize others. So they pick. Pick. Pick. It is easy for a perfectionist to keep looking for the perfect mate and be easily dissatisfied with the one they have. If this was a quality in your betraying spouse, be comforted. No one will meet their standards, and they will likely become disillusioned with the next partner in line.

b. **Unresolved bitterness.** When people hold grudges, it eats a hole in their sense of peace and creates a restlessness inside that no one can relieve. No amount of sex or efforts to please can make up for an embittered heart.

c. **Being offended with God.** We humans sometimes get angry with God when life does not turn out the way we hoped. When our trust in God erodes and our magical thinking is burst, some people secretly seethe about life and ultimately at God. When a person has an offense against God, he or she erects a wall that makes them spiritually insensitive and vulnerable to temptation. When we cut ourselves off from spiritual truth, we open ourselves up to lies. Sometimes a really big lie, like, “I’m a good person. Good people still have affairs. It would be OK with God if I had an affair. After all, he wants me to be happy.”

d. **Restlessness.** There is nothing like the euphoria of a secret, forbidden affair to pull a person out of the doldrums of a frustrating or boring season of life. The restlessness that precedes infidelity is not new. Any of us can be vulnerable to the awakening charge of an electric touch, tempting teasing, or flirtations from an inviting person at the office. The difference is whether we have our guard down or not. I like the idea of subjecting one’s interactions to what Janis A. Spring calls “The well-lit room test.”[4] A wise person will ask themselves, “How would I feel if my spouse could see me now?” That can bring a sobering dose of reality to a potentially compromising situation.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS FOR THERAPISTS.

While I included some of these points in my upcoming book, *Redeeming the Post-Affair Divorce*, this paper that I wrote a few years ago might have provided a concise guide for me to include.[5], [6]

If you are a therapist, please don’t judge me for this. Until you’ve experienced such a betrayal in your own life, you may be lulled into the “therapists need to be morally neutral” myth. No one can avoid bringing their biases into the therapy room, no matter how hard they try. I know I tried. But until I experienced a heartbreaking betrayal, I didn’t realize that trying to be neutral

can actually harm the very people you are trying to help. We may unconsciously send cues to the strayer that what they did was “understandable,” which will only make the betrayed spouse feel worse and misunderstood.

Any attempt to improve a couple’s communication, thinking this will make the affair “go away,” is misguided. Until the unfaithful one’s underlying issues and rationalizations are addressed and dispelled, no amount of improved communication between the couple will bring lasting repair and peace.

Notes:

[1] Notes from a professional workshop, "Crises in Fidelity and Infidelity." Frank Pittman III, M.D. April 24-25, 1987.

[2] Dr. Glass refers to studies that make this correlation in her book, *NOT “Just Friends”* on page 254.

[3] Reference in Emily Brown’s books and workshops. Her book for the general reader: *Affairs: A guide to Working Through the Repercussions of Infidelity*. Her clinical book for professionals: *Patterns of Infidelity and Their Treatment*.

[4] Notes from a professional workshop, “After the Affair.” Janis Abrahms Spring, Ph.D. September 28, 2000.

[5] I recently came across this post that I intended for my blog, but had forgotten about for a few years. I’m glad I rediscovered it. It is now up on my website: <https://www.lindajmacdonald.com/blog/articles>

[6] My new book, *Redeeming the Post-Affair Divorce*, should be out the first week of October 2025.