

This is Episode number 156 for Stay Happily Married: After an Affair. Can anything positive come of it?

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Ned: I'm Ned Daze, and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. I'm joined today by Dr. Molly Parks. Molly is a licensed psychologist practicing with Lepage Associates in Durham, North Carolina. Molly has her Masters and Doctoral degrees in Clinical Psychology from the Masters School of Professional Psychology in Boston. And she is a member of the American Family Therapy Academy as well as the North Carolina Psychological Association.

Molly has a wide variety of experience working with clients, but she specializes in working with clients who are experiencing stress related infidelity. She is really on the front lines working with people every day who are going through this. She is here today to shed a little bit of light on the topic of infidelity and the affect it has on marriage, why spouses cheat and if there is anything good that can come of an affair. Welcome back to the show, Molly. I'm so glad you could join us.

Molly : Thanks so much for having me.

Ned: I'm wondering, people who might find this, searching for marriage and affairs and things like that, who are looking to fix a problem in their marriage, might stumble on this show and just be thinking, it'll be a miracle if we can stay together. Are there couples who are surviving affairs and kind of learning positive things from those? Is that actually something that is happening?

Molly: Yes, absolutely. I think this is a hard area for people to kind of wrap their brains around because it feels, affairs feel - especially right after you've found out about them - just like one of the worst things that can happen in a relationship. But I think from the work that I've done, I have seen couples recover from affairs and actually improve their marriage relationships. And statistically speaking, I think the statistics right now are about a little over 30% of people who have affairs, and the affairs are discovered in the relationship, go on to recover from them and then continue in the relationships.

Ned: That is kind of a comforting statistic. I'm sure most people think it's a lot less than that.

Molly: Yeah, absolutely. When you think about the divorce rate in general being around 50%, it is a comforting specific.

Ned: I'm wondering, how often is this a factor? I mean, you're dealing with clients on a daily basis. How often are people, how often is this an issue in the marriage, that somebody's had an affair?

Molly: I think, being a therapist I'm obviously getting a skewed group, but I find that this is one of the primary reasons that people come in for therapy, is how to navigate this period after just an incredibly hurtful event happening, and you have two people that want to, at least, try to make things work. So for me, it's a high percentage of the couples that I get in for therapy are coming in around an affair related issue.

Ned: I'm wondering in terms of what kind of brings the affair about, as we kind of look at the motivation behind it, are a lot of these kind of spur of the moment things or are they things where they kind of build up over time, as kind of a slippery slope. And what are people thinking when they do this? Is it something where they feel justified in it because the spouse isn't doing X, Y and Z? Does it differ from spouse to spouse?

Molly: Yeah, I think that's a big question. It really depends on the relationship. I get people coming in who there's been a one time affair. Although I have to say, those affairs tend to be less discovered. So, more often when people come in it's longer term affairs because those are the more likely to be found about in a relationship. So that's generally what I see, is I would say a little bit of the longer term affairs where there's been an emotional aspect to it, or the spouse has been cheated on multiple times.

Ned: Right, right. And what are, are people feeling, I guess, when they come to you obviously both of them want to work on it, want to make it better. What are some of the justifications behind the one spouse cheating? Is it something about the other spouse being emotionally unavailable? Things like that. What are you hearing?

Molly: You know, I think that's an interesting question. There again can be multiple reasons why people end up cheating. Sometimes it breaks down along gender lines. I think, I find more often than not men tend to get into affairs because they are feeling, unsexually satisfied at home. And of course, this isn't a hard and fast rule, but there is kind of these gender stereotypes that exist. So they're not feeling sexually desired anymore. They've lost some sense of self in the relationship as feeling needed and wanted. And that women often end up cheating because they are feeling emotionally disconnected in relationships. And again, this can be flipped as well, but that is the trend that I have seen.

Ned: Right, right. Is there any time in particular that you see this happening for couples, or is this kind of across the board? Is this something that happens in new relationships, or people have been married a while, or are there certain life

events? Does having kids trigger a lot of stress where people kind of stray? Is there anything like that that you see coming up?

Molly: Yeah, I think that's a really important question. Because there are, both in what I have seen and there have been studies around this as well, that there are life events that are triggering for affairs. And some of them are actually surprising. The first place that we often see affairs occurring is in the first year of marriage. And I think that we tend to think of that time as a very happy time, it's a time where people are in love and there's new excitement in the relationship. But one of the things that happens in the first year of marriage is it's a transition, a big transition, that people often struggle with. That they aren't expecting to be difficult. And transition where you are expecting happiness and difficulty happens is oftentimes extreme stress for people.

So you know, what we'll see happen is when people get married is there's a lot of excitement around the wedding, there's a lot of excitement around coming together and then there's a big kind of coming down period after that. And then adjusting to living in a house with somebody, if they haven't cohabitated previously. Adjusting to the notion of being with somebody forever. So this is actually a time where people are very at risk of having affairs.

Affairs during this period are usually one time affairs and actually are some of the affairs that tend not to be found out. So, again as I've mentioned before, if it's a one time fling, those tend to be the affairs that go without being noticed by the other partner, without being disclosed. So obviously I would see them, people in that situation less clinically.

The other big at risk times for affairs, another happy time that you would maybe not expect, is after babies are born. So on the part of the man, men often say that their attraction changes to their wife, that they see their wife in a more maternal way, a less sexually attractive way. You're balancing, as you may know personally, exhaustion from taking care of the baby. There's less sexual intimacy. There's another person involved in your relationship now who you love as much as your partner. And there's a real adjustment period with that.

So, women may feel disconnected from their husbands during that time. They feel like they're getting less from them. They're feeling insecure about their husband seeing them as an attraction to them in a different way. And you know, men may feel a different attraction to their wife. So that is another big place where we will see affairs occur.

The last two, and you may have heard of this, is around the seven year mark in relationships. We affectionately call this the seven year itch, where. I don't know if you've heard that term before.

Ned: I have.

Molly: But this is where people have really settled into relationships. It's a time where we also see divorce coming up. So where there's a deepening of relationships but also people can really feel like they've met a lot of their common goals. They've had children, they've bought their dream house, the things that we think about as being positive connectors in relationships. And people end up wondering what's left, moving forward here.

This is a time where I actually clinically see a lot of people coming in, after affairs, is I would say the five to seven year period. And the last period of time is the period we think of as the mid-life crisis. Again where you may see a lot of divorce as well. But the period of time where people are reassessing, what am I doing with my life, I need to add excitement into my life, and affairs will often come out of this.

These last two times, the five to seven year period and the mid-life crisis period tend to result in the more damaging affairs, the longer affairs, the ones where people are really seeking emotional connections elsewhere and have a lot to work through therapeutically once they decide to work on the relationship.

Ned: Right. It almost sounds like the first two are more kind of stress triggered from immediate factors that are coming about, and the other ones are kind of long-term simmering issues, I guess.

Molly: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Ned: I'm wondering, you know, how do spouses react? I guess to back up. You're probably seeing people who are coming to you, they want to fix the marriage. They've realized one partner has had an affair; we want to make this work. They're on the same page to some extent. Are a lot of people kind of just flipping out and saying, I'm divorcing you now. Do you have any kind of feel for what the general reaction is when somebody finds out a spouse is having an affair?

Molly: Yeah, again I think this can really vary from person to person and we all may be able to imagine what our own reactions would be. I see a very typical range of emotion from anger to rage. I see people coming in who are ready to work on things, and people who come in who are really done and are trying therapy as a "last ditch effort", to see if they can salvage anything from the relationship.

One of the reactions that I see that's interesting but a very common reaction is that the person who has been cheated on feels like they want to know every detail of the affair. That's something that you may not think of but I see in almost every couple that I work with. So there's this process of balancing what is useful and helps them feel more in control of the situation as far as learning what happened in this affair, versus what's going to be damaging in the long-term as far as

knowing too much. And too many details that they're then going to have to hold onto and work through and definitely while they're in this relationship.

Ned: Right I am guessing there is such a thing as knowing too much in a circumstance like that.

Molly: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, when you think about just what...when you've got these mental pictures, if somebody does share everything that's happened, you then have to be there with the mental pictures of grappling with seeing your spouse, at least in your head, in your imagination, with somebody else.

Ned: Right, right. When couples come in I guess either when it's a last ditch effort or when they're actually working on fixing it, is it usually the fact that the spouse that's cheating has come clean or has the other spouse figured it out? Or is one group more likely to come in for counseling than the other?

Molly: I would say that I see a mix, that I see a mix. And that is not a factor that I think of as one of the...I have seen people come in with both of those scenarios and decide that they want to split up. And I have seen people come in with both of those scenarios and really work through the issues that led to the affair, and work through the affair itself and go on to have a productive relationship.

Ned: Right, right. And so in your opinion, can any marriage survive an affair or are there certain circumstances, or kind of certain personality types that might have, or maybe even just certain situations where something was just so egregious that it couldn't be repaired?

Molly: I would say that the common factors that I see are not kind of the nature of the affair, but more how the couple is managing it together. I see two really important factors in recovery in the clinical work that I've done. The first and kind of the primary piece that has to be worked through is the person who's had the affair, having a true sense of empathy and remorse for the act itself.

So from what I've seen, having the person who has stepped outside of the marriage really understand and try to put themselves in the place of their spouse. And really be able to express that effectively is the jumping off point for the rest of the therapeutic work. I found when people can't do that it's very hard for them to then work on the bigger picture of how they're going to move forward.

If that can happen, if that does happen, I think then the next step and this is often the harder step for couples, especially for the person who has been cheated on, is really looking, taking an honest and open look at the relationship and the factors that led to the affair, and that is on the parts of both members of the couple. For both people to look openly at their part in the affair occurring.

That is a hard thing for people to stomach, the person who has been cheated on feels like, I didn't do anything. This is my husband or my wife stepping out on me, and I'm the one who needs to be apologized to and we need to work through my hurt. But the reality is that affairs happen for a reason, and the couples that work through that well really look at the reasons and are able to look specifically at their communication patterns, at their intimacy levels, at all of those different factors and work on improving them together.

Ned: There are some kind of tips and steps I want to mention that couples kind of need to go through to get their heads around this. I'm wondering at the end of the tunnel what kinds of things can they look forward to if this is something where they decide to work on the marriage, and kind of work things out. Can couples rebuild trust, can they rebuild commitment? Is there anything that might even end up stronger after going through this experience together?

Molly: Yeah absolutely. I think with, as with any hardship in a relationship if couples can really use it as an opportunity to deepen their relationship, to improve communication, to improve trust, to understand the dynamics of their relationship better, I think that good things can come from infidelity. So if the pain can be worked through, there is a lot of opportunity here for people to use this as an opportunity to, say, get into counseling and to say here's our areas of communication where communication has broken down or we never really got up and running.

Here's how intimacy has looked in our relationship, and here are the places in the relationship where we can pinpoint that things really started feeling more distant, and how can we get that back? So like I said, there are lots of situations and relationships where we're given the opportunity to go down one of two roads. When there's a difficulty we can go down the road of feeling more distant from the person, from our spouse. Or we can go down the road of let's use this as an opportunity to become closer and to really look at what's going on here and why it's happening.

Ned: Right, right. I know we've kind of touched a little bit on these but just quickly run down kind of the five steps that you suggest people go through in terms of kind of rebuilding after the affair. The first one is the empathy and forgiveness which you've touched a little bit on. That kind of has to take place for both spouses, right?

Molly: Yes, absolutely. But I would say, especially initially there needs to be a focus on the partner who has been cheated on. That there is the space given in the therapy for them really to feel validated in their pain.

Ned: Right. We've got, number two is rebuilding trust. I know some people think this is kind of impossible after an affair. What can they do to rebuild that, how is it possible to get that back?

Molly: Yeah, that's an interesting question. Because, I think this is an important step but one that looks so different, differently for different couples. So, I find myself clinically asking people to look at what trust is in the relationship and then starting with the partner who has been cheated on, letting them kind of name things that might make them feel like there is a concerted effort coming from the other partner to attempt to rebuild that trust. So letting them kind of take the lead on that, and then having both members of the couple really look at what is trust, and how has trust played out in our relationship and where is there room for improvement?

Ned: Number three is identifying patterns. What are we talking about when we say that?

Molly: So, this is the step assuming the first two steps have gone relatively well. This is the step that I was referring to where both members of the couple can take an honest look at the relationship and identifying patterns around communication, patterns around intimacy, child rearing. This can be anything from house cleaning to the deeper levels of communication. Of where in the relationship have things kind of gone off track that we haven't really stayed on top of? So essentially where are the areas of work if we are really going to work on improving this relationship? On using this affair to, as a catalyst to deepen our connection and to improve the way we're interacting with one another.

Ned: Number 4, re-identifying the positive roots of the relationship.

Molly: Yeah I mean, I think this is an important step that is useful to point out is that we're all in relationships for a reason. We were attracted to this person initially for a reason and so being able to go back there with a couple and identify what were the initial things that made you fall in love with this person? What were the things that initially brought this relationship together? And finding ways to appreciate or return to some of those reasons. So I think we all have the experience of relationships getting, I don't want to say stale, but we get into monotony. And I think of this as a step where we can look at ways to bring some of that newness back into the relationship.

Ned: Right, right. Last one is willingness to work. That's a pretty obvious one but I'm guessing that's kind of for everybody involved.

Molly: Yeah, and that's definitely not an order. I see one of the most useful qualities that I see in couples is where both members of the partnership are really willing to work on this and are dedicated to moving forward. That is obviously a big glitch when you have one member who is ambivalent about moving forward or just isn't putting in the effort that the other member is.

Ned: Was there anything else we need to know, any more advice on kind of building the relationship back after an affair?

Molly: I think the message that I really wanted to give today is that affairs can feel like a certain end to a relationship. And I guess the message that I would want to put forth as a therapist is that, although it may feel unbelievable right after finding out about an affair, that people who are committed to working on the relationship and moving through the affair, that an affair can actually bring positive results to the relationship if both members of a couple are really willing to look at what brought the affair on and work on improving the relationship moving forward. I think it's an important message to have out there and an important role that therapy can play, if people are willing to do the work.

Ned: Yeah, well, I think this is definitely good news for couples going through this and looking for light at the end of the tunnel.

Molly: Absolutely.

Ned: Good to know that they can make it through and make their relationships stronger in the long run.

Molly: Absolutely

Ned: Well Molly, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us today, I really appreciate it.

Molly: Yeah, it was great, it was great to be here, thank you for having me.

Ned: Absolutely. You can find out a lot more about Molly by visiting [LepageAssociates.com](http://LepageAssociates.com) or by calling her office at 919-572-0000.

Thank you so much for joining us today. I hope you join us again next week. We always love to hear from you. To comment on this or any other episode you can call our listener comment line at 919-256-2083. Or e-mail us at [comments@stayhappilymarried.com](mailto:comments@stayhappilymarried.com). I'm Ned Daze, until next time Stay Happily Married.

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