

Ambivalence About Returning to the Marriage

This article by Peggy Vaughan deals with the instance where the person who had an affair has left the marriage but is ambivalent about whether or not to return—and the spouse is ambivalent about whether or not to let them return.

We tend to assume that the "hurt" spouse is the one most likely to be uncertain about whether to try to save the marriage; however, most of the time they want to at least "try." But it's not unusual for the person who *had* the affair to be the one who decides to leave—or who can't make a clear decision either way.

It's not that anyone "should" continue to hope for/work for getting their spouse back. It's just that it's the "smart" thing to do—regardless of the fact that it's "unfair" to do all the work, etc. The reason it's smart to try everything you can for as long as you can (even if the efforts eventually fail and there is a divorce) is *not* because "the marriage should be saved at all costs." It's because your ability to *live* with the divorced situation is *much* different if you know you did all you could for as long as you could before giving up.

Also, of course, it makes a difference how long they've been gone—and whether there was any opportunity to make an effort *before* they left. I add this only because sometimes people separate/divorce quickly without a chance to see whether or not the marriage could be rebuilt. So there's some advantage to being open to the "possibility" of rebuilding the marriage—primarily because if the possibility is there and is not pursued, then you may always "second-guess" yourself as to whether or not you "could have or should have" done something more.

I don't advocate "staying together at all costs," but I do advocate getting enough information and understanding about the whole situation that such a life-altering decision can be made based on an "informed opinion" rather than being based on "emotions."

Frankly, in most instances, it's impossible to know whether or not the marriage can be saved until you have exhausted absolutely every effort—which normally takes about 2 years. (And of course, 2 years is not magic since time alone doesn't help; it's only time spent actively trying to see if things can be worked out.) Even if at the end of the 2 years the decision is made to get a divorce, the time will not

have been wasted because it's not just what decision is ultimately made, but when and how it's made, that makes a difference in how well you "live" with the decision.

Through the years I've heard from people over a period of many years after they learned of an affair. As I said earlier, those who too quickly gave up forever "second-guess" themselves. But those who waited and worked and tried for about 2 years had a much better chance of saving the marriage. And even if they didn't, they could then get a divorce without doubting whether they should have done more.

Until the divorce is final (and occasionally even later), there's always some possibility of getting back together. Of course, an ex's "waking up" to the reality that the grass is not greener doesn't necessarily mean they're ready to take the steps necessary to rebuild the marriage. Frankly, "wanting" to come back (or even "intending" to change) are not enough. It's their "actions" that matter. Otherwise, people can ping-pong back and forth for a long time: coming home, then leaving again, then wanting to return again, etc.

So the key is their willingness to take ACTIONS—specifically:

- severing all contact with the third party
- getting answers to your questions
- talking through the whole thing.

Yes, talking is essential. As one person wrote..."if we stop talking, we might drift further apart and it will mean the end of the marriage."

If there is no willingness to do these things, then there is unlikely to be the kind of lasting change needed. But with this kind of genuine effort, it *is* possible to rebuild the marriage into a stronger, more honest relationship than existed prior to this crisis. Since few people want a "deadened marriage" (married in name only), this is certainly worth working toward.

However, as I've said, *none* of this is to say that anyone "should" wait any particular length of time. It's just that this gives the best chance of either succeeding in saving the marriage *or* in living with the reality of the divorce. And, of course, there is no "guarantee" about any of this; it's simply the smarter effort to make.

The bottom line is that it's got to be an individual decision. Because different people might be faced with the same general dilemma... but (based on their

individual wants, needs, hopes, priorities, etc.) may make different decisions—and in each case the decision may be right for that particular person.

(Note: While I've tried to explain why some people choose to stay with spouses who have affairs, I want to be very clear that I'm *not* saying anyone "should" stay. What I *am* saying is that we should respect and support each person's individual choices about significant issues in their lives—even when we disagree or fail to understand.)

The "Approach-Avoidance" Dynamic:

Below are some excerpts from my response to a person who was having an affair and was experiencing an "approach-avoidance" dynamic that often happens when a person who has had an affair can't make a final decision. (Actually, men who have affairs are more likely to get caught up in the approach-avoidance dynamic than women—but it's good perspective for everyone.)

The person having an affair often doesn't know precisely what they want to do following the disclosure/exposure of an affair. Far more often than people realize, they're ambivalent and uncertain. They want to "keep their options" open as long as possible--because they want to hold onto the positive aspects of the affair while still holding open the possibility of eventually returning to the marriage. It's unlikely they can actually "say" that out loud (or that they can even get that degree of clarity themselves). They just know that they don't want to face the difficulties and/or consequences of either final decision. Often it becomes a classic "approach/avoidance" situation where the closer they come to making a decision in one direction, the more likely they are to shift toward the other decision.

What frequently happens is that the married person who is having an affair initially focuses on the "positive" aspects of leaving the marriage in order to be with the third party. (During this period they often compare the positives of the affair with the negatives of the marriage, leading them to discussions and/or plans for leaving the marriage.) Then as they get closer to making that decision, there's often a shift where they start focusing on the potential "negative" impact of this decision (financial concerns, future dealings with ex, kids, generally letting go of the family, including the "image" that goes with that), as well as concerns about the potential future with the third party.

They often don't want to have to choose and may be willing to stay "undecided" for quite a long while. In fact, they may be willing to continue this

kind of arrangement indefinitely, sometimes only making a final decision when either the spouse or the third party insists.

This is not to suggest that an "ultimatum" should be given (since those often backfire), but it's smart for the wife to clarify that she also has a decision to make; it's not just him. And during this "limbo" time, it's helpful if the wife keeps as busy as possible, not neglecting other areas of life. She needs to dig down and find whatever strength can be mustered to do things on her own that have nothing to do with the other person. This can have a positive impact, not only on her own sense of herself but also on his attitude toward her (in that being "pitiful" is usually a turn-off and not at all appealing).

Of course, it's important to make every effort to get the "man in the middle" to recognize just how unfair this uncertainty is to *both* the wife *and* the other woman). He needs to make a clear decision (and commitment) to ending the affair and strictly focusing on deciding "marriage" vs. "no marriage" rather than choosing one woman/situation over the other.

There's a better prospect for making a more reasonable decision about the future when the realistic prospects for the marriage are not being assessed in comparison to the fantasy image of the affair relationship. So regardless of the eventual decision about rebuilding the marriage, severing the relationship with the other woman allows the limbo period to end.

Below are some thoughts from a woman with whom I had shared the above perspective:

(It's always good to hear first-hand how a specific person handled this kind of situation in their own life, so below is her sharing):

In my own case I decided to fight for my marriage—NOT to save it at all costs, but for many reasons - primarily because I "needed" to do everything possible before I walked away as only then could I face myself and not spend weeks, months or years wondering "If only I had done....." My husband's affair was long-term and continued for over 2+1/2 years. He believed he loved the other woman and I believe she loved him. However by the time I found out - undeniably - he had tried to end the relationship with her, but doing so proved harder than he thought - and "as long as I didn't know" who was getting hurt....? and he'd told her he realized he didn't love her, never-the-less it continued.

The 'odds' weren't good as he repeatedly told me he would NOT change his mind, he would NOT return, there was NO hope and for me to move on with my life. I can't count the number of times he told me to stop sending him messages, letters, etc., and many of the things said were more hurtful than the infidelity itself. I guess in a nutshell, despite what anyone said or advised, I had to do what was/felt 'right' for me, no-one else, just me. Many, many times the easiest thing for me to do (as I was repeatedly advised - unasked) would have been to walk away.

Actions vs. words! Another factor that played a role was I knew my husband very well, and despite his "words" his "actions" weren't congruent. His words were saying one thing but many of his actions were 'saying' something else, (although he denied giving me 'mixed signals'.) For example, he didn't want separation of assets or any change to our banking habits, we would continue to attend family events together - he said the only thing that was truly changing was he wasn't living with me anymore. He continued to come to the house to do 'odd jobs', mow the lawn etc., and kept a house key so he could "help" me with those type of things. I told him to return the key or give me a key to HIS residence so I could 'return the favour'. He was not impressed with this idea so I told finally him if he didn't return the key I'd have the locks changed as it wasn't acceptable he have entry into my home if I didn't have entry into his!! Again he wasn't impressed but reluctantly gave up the key.

He was adamant that he was not leaving me "for the other woman" but he was no longer "in love" with me. Confusion reigned supreme!! At times I thought I was going insane - again, isn't that a familiar feeling? I must add that "knowing" my husband so well was not always a plus, I knew he very rarely reversed a decision for any reason, and at times would "cut off his nose to spite his face" and one of my greatest fears was 'if' he changed his mind once he'd moved out, would he 'allow' himself to return and swallow his pride - and I voiced this fear to him. In the end, I just had to get through each day the best I could and do what felt right for me."