Why Women Cheat

Most women have affairs for very different reasons than men.

By Tammy Worth

When Thea and her husband moved to Los Angeles a few years ago, she had no friends close by and was alone frequently while her husband worked long hours. Though Thea says her husband was the "best friend someone could have," the spark and sex were gone.

Seeking company and a little romance, Thea became a member of AshleyMadison.com, a website that connects married people wanting to have an affair.

Thea began an ongoing affair after a few dates with a man. "He was giving me all of the stuff my husband wasn't -- attention and affection," she says.

There are many reasons for infidelity such as revenge, boredom, the thrill of sexual novelty, sexual addiction. But experts say that a large majority of the time, motivations differ by gender, with men searching for more sex or attention and women looking to fill an emotional void.

"Women tell me, 'I was lonely, not connected, I didn't feel close to my partner, and I was taken for granted,'" marriage and family therapist Winifred Reilly says. "They say they wanted to have someone who would look into their eyes and make them feel sexy again."

Searching for an Emotional Connection

Every affair is different, and so are every woman's reasons for her involvement.

Nevertheless, Rutgers University biological anthropologist Helen Fisher, author of Why Him? Why Her? And Why We Love, says men are more likely to cite sexual motivations for infidelity and are less likely to fall in love with an extramarital partner. Women, she says, tend to have an emotional connection with their lover and are more likely to have an affair because of loneliness.
"Women tend to be more unhappy with the relationship they are in," Fisher says, "while men can be a lot happier in their primary relationship and also cheat. Women are more interested in supplementing their marriage or jumping ship than men are -- for men, it is a secondary strategy as opposed to an alternate."

Fisher has found that 34% of women who had affairs were happy or very happy in their marriage. 56% of men who had affairs were happy in their marriage.

Is It in a Woman’s Genes?

The theory that adultery is "natural" for men, fulfilling their Darwinian need to spread their seed, has been around a long time. But the connection women look for when having affairs may have evolutionary roots as well.

The theory, Fisher says, is that from the earliest days, women paired with a primary mate to have children. But as women went out to gather food, they slept with other men, creating an insurance policy to have someone who would help rear children and provide resources should their mate die.

"Women who slept around collected more meat, protection, and resources from their lovers," Fisher says. "She might even have an extra child to create more genetic variety in her lineage; if some children die, others will live on."

That theory is controversial and can’t be proven or disproven eons later. But experts say that women's motivations to have affairs are typically more than sexual. That's not to say that some women don't have affairs just for the sex or that sex wasn't important. But in general, women's motivations aren't just about sex.

“I don't think women are doing it because they want to have more sex. But I don't think they mind if they get it," Reilly says. "It is not really about sex per se as much as the experience of being with somebody."

Jumping Ship

Diane left her marriage emotionally long before she had an affair. She says she was living with a lot of disillusionment in a disappointing, sexless marriage.
"You feel the loss of your dreams and hopes and how you thought things would turn out," Diane says. "I was very lonely; I could never understand the concept of being lonely in a marriage until it happened."

Diane began to flirt with other men to get attention, but she never considered having an affair. After a business trip with a friend turned romantic, she began a long-term affair, a path she admits she was likely on anyway as her marriage dissolved.

Using another partner to transition out of a bad marriage is one of the common reasons women have affairs.

"They are on a sinking ship and use it as a life raft because they don't want to just jump into the cold water," Reilly says.

She also sees some women have affairs during periods of vulnerability or life change, like when a child goes off to college or after a job loss. They may see it as a form of comfort during upheaval.

Another common reason is a cry for help in the marriage. One of Reilly’s patients had an affair, ended it, and then told her husband as a way to point out they were in more trouble than he thought.

Reilly says her clinical experience has shown that affairs are almost always caused by problems in the marriage. Therapy may be helpful to avoid going down that path.

"People have affairs because they are looking for something," Reilly says. Although she sees a number of couples grappling with infidelity, "more people come to me [before it happens] because they want to save their marriage."

**Affairs with Intention**

Women are also less likely than men to have an affair that "just happens" because they tend to think longer and harder about the situation, experts say.
Some women take time "to warm up to it," Marcella Weiner, adjunct professor at Marymount Manhattan College, says. "Going in and leaving quickly isn't their thing. Men can walk away more easily because their emotions are just different and it is unusual for a woman to want to have sex and forget about it."

It may be an old notion that women are the ones who get attached in a relationship, Reilly says. But she sees that women do connect with their partners in affairs and think more about taking part in one.

"Women really can recognize the risk for them," Reilly says, pointing to the possibility of losing their partner because of an affair.

**Why I Cheated on My Husband**

By Colleen Oakley

The first question that comes to mind when a spouse cheats is: Why? A recent study by the University of Guelph in Ontario, Canada, attempted to answer that question and found that the reasons behind infidelity differ greatly between the sexes. For men, it’s typically about the sex—the more sexually excitable they are, the more likely they are to cheat. For women, it’s more about the level of satisfaction in her relationship; if a woman is unhappy in her marriage, she’s 2.6 times more likely to cheat. Regardless of the reason, there’s one thing that’s certain: infidelity is devastating. But there can be a silver lining. “In many cases, it forces issues to the surface of a relationship that would have never otherwise been dealt with,” says Kevin Hansen, author of *Secret Regrets: What if You Had a Second Chance?* Read on to discover what life lessons these five women gained through their personal experiences with infidelity—and what you can learn from their stories.
“My husband was abusive.”

“From the day I married my husband, I knew it was a mistake,” says 50-year-old Elizabeth Smith.* “He was abusive, controlling and expected me to quit my job to make a home for him.” A little over a year into the marriage, she began having an affair with a man that she worked with. “I had no illusions that I was in love, but it was eye-opening to be with someone that made me feel good about myself, made me laugh and respected me for who I was—not who he wanted me to be,” she says. “The affair helped me find myself and proved to me that I could live a life independent of my husband. It also gave me the courage to ask for a divorce. Twenty-five years later, I’m married to a wonderful man. We love making each other happy, and never try to change who the other person is,” she says.

*What You Can Learn:* While the confidence gained from the affair may have given her the spark she needed to get out of a bad relationship, New York City psychologist Michael E. Silverman, PhD, says if you’re in an abusive relationship, deception isn’t the best way to deal with it. Get help first from a trusted friend, family member, therapist or one of the numerous nationwide resources instead.

“We began to resent each other.”

When Vanessa Myers, 28, married her husband six years ago, they both couldn’t wait to have children, but after their wedding day something changed for her. “I started to really love my job, and kids didn’t seem to fit into the picture,” she says. Her husband was hurt by her change of heart, and began to resent her. “We started fighting a lot, and I resented him for resenting me and we were just constantly hurting each other,” she says. “One night I caught him trying to slip off the condom and that was pretty much the end of our sex life.” Ultimately, the lack of intimacy caused Vanessa to cheat. “I met a guy online and we dated for about a year,” she says. “It ended when my husband caught me.” Vanessa and her husband agreed to seek therapy separately and together, and were able to save their marriage. “The biggest lesson I learned was that if I was unhappy in my marriage, my husband was only 50% to blame. [Having] an affair gave me the courage to ask for what I wanted in my marriage,” she says.
What You Can Learn: While what her husband did may be shocking, the fact that there was unaddressed anger in the relationship created fertile ground for an affair, says Dr. Silverman. “Coupled with the lack of sexual intimacy there was nothing left to hang a relationship on,” he says. Even though the affair helped Vanessa learn some valuable lessons and the relationship was ultimately saved, Dr. Silverman stresses the importance of open and honest communication in a relationship as a way for a couple to stay connected—before one of the spouses seeks comfort or intimacy outside of the marriage.

“I was bored and unhappy.”

At 35-years-old, Barbara Gisborne was living the American dream. She lived in Madison, Wisconsin, with her loving husband and two children—but she was miserable. “My husband was a good man, but I was bored inside and out,” she says. “In our community, I always felt like a square peg trying to fit in a round hole.” That year, she was in Chicago on business and met Bob, an Australian man, on an elevator. “We had an instant connection. We exchanged numbers, kept in touch, and I decided to fly out to Australia to see him and get him out of my system,” she says. “Instead, I fell in love.” She left everything she knew—her hometown, her husband, her job and her country—to start her life over with Bob in Australia. “I became strong, independent, confident and much worldlier,” she says. “That was 25 years ago and now I can say that my affair was the turning point in my life’s journey. Today, Bob and I are married, own a winery in Australia, and have five children and 10 grandchildren between us.”

What You Can Learn: Though Barbara's story ended up with a "happily ever after," that's not always the case when it comes to infidelity, which is why Dr. Silverman suggests looking inside yourself if you're unhappy or bored with your relationship. “Healthy relationships grow and evolve, and feeling bored is a symptom of relationship stagnation. Rather than having an affair, increase the romance, change habitual patterns within the relationship and communicate more about your feelings and needs.” If you just need a change of pace, try booking an exotic vacation with your husband or girlfriends, or discuss moving to a new city and starting over.
“My husband was a workaholic.”

For 10 years, 49-year-old Barbara Singer created a life independent of her husband because he was never around. “Gary was totally consumed and exhausted by his work—there was nothing left for me,” she says. “I was totally committed to my family and gave it my all, but knew in my heart that I certainly did not want this for rest of my life.” One night, she met up with Tom, an acquaintance, and ended up staying out all night with him. Within a few weeks of meeting him, she ended her marriage, and two years later, she and Tom were married. But within a month, he died of a heart attack. “Meeting Tom was the best and worst thing that ever happened to me. He came into my life and woke me up, showing me...that life is precious and that at any given moment, it can all be taken away, so if I have a dream or a goal, I better get moving on it,” she says.

What You Can Learn: “Barbara felt alone for many years, and feeling disconnected from your partner is the genesis of most of the affairs I see in my practice,” says Dr. Silverman. The remedy? Speak up and begin a dialogue with your partner. Engaging in open, honest communication about your needs with your husband is the key to help a stalled marriage.

“He was unfaithful first.”

Larie Norvell had only been married about a year when she found out that her husband had cheated on her. “I was very angry, but I was also very hurt, because I felt like I wasn’t enough for him—like there was something I wasn’t doing for him as his wife, which is why he felt the need to go outside of our marriage,” says the 33-year-old. That jumble of mixed emotions was the impetus for her affair. “I cheated on him—mostly for revenge, but in retrospect it was also because I wanted validation. I wanted to know that I was still desirable to other men,” she says. Once her affair was discovered, the couple separated for a few months—but then began to seek counseling and were able to salvage their marriage.

What You Can Learn: Retribution is a common feeling when someone has been betrayed, says Dr. Silverman. “Anger can be quite powerful in clouding one’s judgment,” he says, which is why he urges any couple dealing with infidelity to
seek counseling. Fortunately for Larie, her relationship endured the double deception. “The biggest lesson we’ve learned through all the struggles in 14 ½ years is that we are enough for each other,” she says.

* Names changed for privacy reasons.