Who is the Other Woman?

By Rick Reynolds, LCSW

Disclaimer: This may be a difficult article for some of you to read. Before reading, take a moment to consider how far along you are in recovery. Those who are newer to recovery will not be able to process the information in this article from an objective perspective. The information is important to understand, but the last thing we want to do is to cause unnecessary pain. Our suggestion is to wait until you are further along in recovery so you will be able to truly absorb all the article says without reacting.

Who is the other woman? Is she a home wrecker, a floozy, a bimbo? Is she someone to be hated or pitied? Why would you even want to know? Because the answer to that question can profoundly influence your ability to release what’s happened and move on to a new life.

Due to Affair Recovery demographics I am writing this article as if the man had the affair and was involved with another woman. If I were to write this article as if the woman had the affair and is involved with another man different dynamics would come into play.

There is never an excuse for what the other woman has done, but remaining forever tied to the other woman as a result of unforgiveness leaves the betrayed spouse anchored to the past. Typically moving forward either as a couple or an individual requires a shift in how the other woman is viewed; developing a realistic understanding of who she is. Usually the unfaithful spouse needs to stop overvaluing the other woman and the betrayed spouse needs to stop devaluing the other woman if either of them ever wants freedom from that person. Hopefully exploring who they are will enable both the hurt and unfaithful spouse to release and move forward.

Labeling the other woman as a tramp may prevent the betrayed spouse from ever moving forward. In the same way, the other woman is likely to label the wife as cold or dismissive. In reality there’s a bit of good in the worst of us and a bit of bad in the best of us. Failure to see more than just the negative aspects can block
your ability to set yourself free from their hurtful actions. Seeing the other woman as human doesn’t excuse what she’s done, but it does provide a pathway to forgiveness. Remember forgiveness is a gift you give yourself to set yourself free. It’s not for the sake of the unfaithful spouse nor does it have anything to do with being around the other woman, but it does free you from losing your peace when they come to mind.

A major barrier to recovery for the betrayed spouse is an unrealistic view of the other woman. The wife needs to develop a fuller understanding of the affair partner as a human being if she wants to fully recover.

For married men in an affair with a married woman, the affair can be more of a diversion while for the married woman it can become their life. This woman is looking for traits missing in her husband. Married men in affairs with single women are likely to view the relationship as entertainment or a distraction. Single women, on the other hand may view the affair as a pathway to the life they want. Little do they realize the odds are not in their favor. Jan Halper’s survey of over 4,100 prominent men revealed that 85% of those who cheated returned home to their families and only 3% of those who got divorced while in an ongoing affair married the affair partners.

The following list briefly explains a few of the most common types of affair partners. Remember these are generalizations with the intent of humanizing the other woman so that you can find peace and healing.

**The Rebound Affair:**

In rebound affairs, the case of the other woman flips on its head. Many of you reading this are rightly indignant feeling you would never be the other woman in an affair. You may be right, but a large number of the affairs we treat are the result of rebound affairs. One potential consequence suffered by the betrayed spouse is the devastation of the significance of their marriage vows. Pain that’s not transformed will be transmitted, and in an attempt to make their mate feel their pain they betray themselves and indulge in the same behavior as their mate. In an attempt to get back at their mate, these betrayed spouses suddenly find themselves as the “other woman.” So the other woman you are facing may have started out as a betrayed spouse similar to you, only she couldn’t stand the
pain and acted drastically. Many who’ve been betrayed are tempted, but strong morals and values as well as their commitment prevent them from taking this course. Tragically those who give in not only prolong their own pain, but transmit their pain to their mate and to another woman as well.

**The Married Other Woman:**

While this may be stereotypical, the “married woman” has often become disillusioned with her mate and connects with someone she believes can supply the happiness her mate has failed to deliver. These women have typically watched their marriage fading away for years and feel completely detached from their husbands as a result of years of neglect. Again, this does not justify their actions, but you can see how no longer valuing their own marriage would make it easy to push their guilt away enough to begin an affair.

**The Abuse Reactive Other Woman:**

At times the other woman is a person who was abused growing up. This person is motivated by identity wounds created by that abuse. Seeing themselves as damaged may create a desire to reinforce that belief by acting out in ways that degrade themselves and others. Frequently the only way they can feel loved is when they act out sexually. Their desperation to feel loved drives them into an affair. Again this in no way justifies what they’ve done.

Years ago I had a woman come in who fit this category. When I asked what I could do for her she responded, “I’ve had sex with over 250 men, but that’s not why I’m here. I’m here because I’ve never had an orgasm.” “Then why did you have sex with all those men?” I asked. “Because that moment when we’re sexual is the only time I ever feel loved.” Our work together revealed extreme sexual abuse by her father from age six to twelve. That’s no excuse for what she had done. It did, however, destroy the inhibitors that should have prevented her from acting out with other men. Once again pain that’s not transformed will be transmitted.

Another type of an abuse reactive other woman emerges from dysfunctional families even where sexual abuse did not occur. If a woman sees her mother disrespected or abused by her father, the child may see her mother as weak and pathetic. This may lead her to become the Liberated Other Woman (description
below), never wanting to depend on a man the way her mother depended on her abusive father.

The same is true a woman who was spousified by her father. As a child her father begins sharing his pain, success and frustrations with her rather than his wife. It may not be sexual, but it is emotional incest. As a result she lives in a triangle feeling sorry for her dad because of how her mom is treating him. She fails to see that her mom's reactions are the result of her father's neglect. Once grown, this woman is susceptible to repeating that same triangle with a married man. Once again they compete with the wife, despising her for the way she believes the wife is treating the husband. Little does she know the husband, like her father, is distorting who their mate really is. Living in the triangle as the other woman is what they know and to them it feels normal.

The Subordinate Other Woman:

Frequently this younger woman falls for an older man, often at the workplace. The distinction of this woman is the power differential between herself and the married spouse. The attention paid by someone she respects and the allure of getting ahead allows them to justify the affair. Once the affair begins this person believes their affair partner when they say they are going to leave their spouse to begin a life with the younger woman. That belief can keep them hanging on for years as they wait. While this person may be naïve, they are certainly not a victim, but neither is the married man who is using them.

The Desperate Other Woman:

This woman is someone who’s willing to settle for scraps. She has such low self-esteem she is willing to take whatever time she can get. She’s available at his beck and call, but when demands are placed on him she rarely warrants a response. Fear of losing the relationship keeps her hanging on, especially since she has no real sense of self.

The Liberated Other Woman:

This career-minded woman enjoys her freedom and wants relationships with no strings attached. She typically has affairs with married men she feels comfortable
with. If one of her partners begins to get attached she will quickly send them packing, at times leaving the married spouse feeling rejected and acting like a lovesick puppy. This woman probably has no real relationships and thus cannot wrap her mind around the effects of her actions.

**The Conned Other Woman:**

There are some women who’ve been conned by the married man. In these cases the woman has no clue that the man is married. When they finally find out it’s devastating for them. The length of the relationship and the depth of the bond determine how devastating the loss of the relationship. Generally these women feel they’ve been made the fool.

The last three categories are adapted from Shirley Glass’ book “Not Just Friends”.

**The Antagonist Other Woman:**

This woman betrays other women by stealing their husbands. She views other women as rivals and feels no need for loyalty to or identification with her own gender. She does not regard herself as a “sister” to other women. She seldom has other women as friends and leans on men to enhance her fragile ego and gratify her emotional needs.

**The Escapist Other Woman:**

To deny the existence of his wife and family, the escapist affair partner puts the marriage out of mind and out of sight. She never asks questions about his other life. She doesn’t consider any repercussions from their illicit affair because the time she spends with her beau is an escape into an alternate reality.

**The Family Counselor Other Woman:**

Assuming the role of family therapist is another way to assuage guilt. The other woman offers insights to improve her suitor’s communication with his children and to help him understand his wife’s point of view. Acting partly out of real concern and partly out of self-preservation, she tries to make things better. Laurel Richardson says that the single woman affair partner does “feminist social work
among the married.” As a result, the affair partner perceives herself as a good person who makes positive contributions to her partner’s family life.”

If you’ve made it this far let me reiterate I’m in no way trying to excuse the other woman. I’m also not saying you have to change a thing in how you view the other woman. I am suggesting you might want to consider the possibility that the situation isn’t as black and white as you may think. My hope for all of you is to get free from the marrow sucking life-robbing crisis of infidelity. I believe that one way that goal is accomplished is by expanding our understanding of those around us and hopefully come to a point where we can set ourselves free by finding compassion in our hearts for those who have so gravely wounded us. I would grieve if the hurtful actions of others rob you of your humanity.

Finally, one of three things will occur with great suffering:

1. You will go insane,

2. You will become forever bitter and resentful, or

3. You will learn to love greatly and have great compassion.

The road to the third outcome isn’t easy, but it’s a goal well worth pursuing. For the sake of others remember: pain that’s not transformed will be transmitted. Let your pain be transformed for your sake, the sake of those you love and for the sake of those who love you.