Case Studies

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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FULL TEXT

How to cool down the temperature with couples facing the crisis of infidelity.

EVERY THERAPIST KNOWS THAT THE DISCLOSURE OF AN extramarital affair can create an explosive crisis undermining the foundation of trust necessary to sustain a relationship. In the midst of that turbulence, our job is to help couples find a pathway to a new understanding of themselves and their marriage. But how is the therapist to maintain his or her bearings in such stormy cases? I have found a standard protocol, first developed at the Center for Family Learning, extremely helpful in providing a therapeutic structure for couples facing the crisis of infidelity. The protocol serves to keep the anxiety in the therapy room both the couple's and my own in check and makes sure that I don't get distracted from important issues either by the couple's emotional process or my own moral judgments.

ED AND LINDA GREEN'S MARRIAGE WAS IN BIG TROUBLE. Linda had just found out about Ed's nine-month affair with Nadine an affair that ended when Nadine aborted a pregnancy. The couple had brought their problem to Ed's aunt, a physician whom both of them liked and admired, and she referred them to me. When they came for their first appointment, both Ed and Linda looked scared and told me I was the "last hope" for their marriage. Before asking them anything about the affair, I began, as I always do, by taking a genogram. Calming down the system is my initial goal with couples caught up in the crisis of infidelity, and instead of making the crisis itself the first subject discussed, I try to relax the couple by asking them to give me factual information about their family histories.

Ed and Linda met in college and married in 1984, three years after Ed's graduation. They now had a 3-year-old daughter, Lauren. Ed, the oldest of four children and the only son, was a 32-year-old marketing manager for the local subsidiary of a large corporation. He lived in constant fear that the corporate headquarters a thousand miles away would sell the subsidiary and that he would lose his job. Both of Ed's parents were in their sixties, but while his mother was in good health and worked as a secretary, his father had a serious neuromuscular disease that made him an invalid and caused him to retire on disability eight years ago. Ed idealized his parents and was reluctant to say anything critical about them and this was an issue between Ed and Linda. When tears welled up in Ed's eyes as he told me that his father could die at any time, Linda interrupted to inform me that Ed's parents had always made him believe that "he's a piece of shit."

Linda, the youngest of four sisters, worked as a human resources manager for a mid-size manufacturing company. While she was in college, her father, to whom she had been close, had died of the same disease from which Ed's father was now suffering. Her mother had remarried, and no one in the family (except Linda's mother, presumably) liked her current husband. Linda said that her mother had had an affair during her father's years of illness. When I finally asked Ed about his affair, he told me that Nadine and her husband had been friends and neighbors for four years. The mutual attraction between him and Nadine had begun the previous Thanksgiving, and by



Christmas they were having sex regularly. Other than the attraction, Ed's only explanation for the affair was his wife's unwillingness to have sex as often as he wanted it. Linda had a different view she believed that the criticism Ed received from his parents made him look to others to build him up. "I got tired of doing that, and Nadine picked up the slack," she said. Nevertheless, she did agree that her low sex drive since Lauren's birth had created a real problem in the marriage.

When I asked about the current status of Ed's relationship with Nadine, both Ed and Linda told me it was absolutely over. Ed had had no contact with Nadine since her abortion and he expressed great fear about seeing her. He was concerned that Nadine was responsible for some hang-up telephone calls he had recently received at work.

From my clinical viewpoint, this solved one potential problem. If the affair had still been going on, I would have explained that marital therapy was a waste of time and money. I would have asked Ed to agree to end it and, to see whether he was following through, I would have paid careful attention to his emotional state. In my clinical experience, if a person gives up an affair that has been serving some function or meeting some need, his or her sadness or anger about the loss will soon show up unless some fundamental changes take place in the marriage. Another goal of the early stage of treatment in these cases is to encourage the non-affair spouse to state clearly his or her conditions for continuing the relationship and, once this is stated, to pull back to a non-reactive position. Typically, the non-affair spouse has not clearly indicated such a bottom line, hoping that things will change and die problem will just go away. Likewise, once the affair comes into the open, the non-affair spouse typically pursues his or her partner with recriminations, questions, pleading, etc. Linda, however, was very clear about her bottom line: any repetition of Ed's infidelity would mean the end of their marriage. She had difficulty, though, refraining from pursuing Ed with questions and recriminations, even though she recognized the importance of remaining non-reactive.

In the early stages of therapy, I helped Ed to express the impact of the loss of the affair so that his grief would not surface in some indirect way depression, self-pity, resentment or feelings that I, as the therapist, was on Linda's side. Although I was troubled to hear Ed deny any sense of loss, except for missing Nadine's admiration and praise, I reluctantly accepted his refusal to deal with the issue. When Linda complained that Ed was putting pressure on her for immethate forgiveness *and* for plenty of sex, I encouraged Ed not only to give up pressuring her, but to avoid subtly manipulating her by getting angry or emotionally distant. While Ed agreed to work on this, it was a real struggle and he tended to get somewhat depressed.

Ed and Linda's commitment to each other, and Ed's assurance that the affair was over, quickly calmed the emotional climate between them. My next goal was to tease out what led to the affair and to delineate each spouse's part in the process. I made it clear that I saw Ed's decision to have an affair as his responsibility and his alone, that if he was unhappy in his marriage, there were other options, like asking Linda to go for professional help. At the same time, I emphasized that the problems in the marriage were Ed and Linda's joint responsibility, and that they both had to look at their own parts in creating them. Both of these statements were pivotal in my approach. It is crucial to avoid misunderstandings about the concept of responsibility, and about where I stand on it.

Ed admitted that he tended to engage in what the three of us jokingly called the "F-A-L" pattern: fear, anger, leave. I find that labeling things this way lightens the atmosphere with humor, reassuring clients by normalizing their behavior and emphasizing the predictability of the behavior patterns that need to be changed. Ed, fearful of not being perfect, of foiling, of feeling bad, would blame Linda for her lack of encouragement, support and sex, and would withdraw into silence. Linda admitted that what she perceived as Ed's neediness frightened her. She would withdraw in the face of a problem or demand, feel resentful that it had been made, and then get critical of Ed. That became, of course, the "W-R-C pattern."

I pointed out the parallels between these patterns and the roles each had played in parental triangles in their respective families of origin. Ed had been the object of parental criticism and concern while growing up, and had always felt undervalued and unsupported. Linda had been her father's emotional support because her mother



could not deal with his illness and weakness. The demands of this role had made her feel special, but very uncomfortable; she had learned to distance herself and put up a wall to avoid these demands, but she also valued her father's attention.

Once Ed and Linda were able to recognize these patterns, I assigned homework to help shift them. Because Linda complained about Ed's lack of attention except when he wanted sex, Ed agreed to take responsibility for talking about her day at dinnertime. He was not to make any sexual demands or even overtures. Because Ed claimed that Linda did not appreciate the things he did or care about what he needed, I coached Linda on giving Ed a few minutes alone when she came home (he got home from work first and took care of Lauren). She was also to take responsibility for their sex life to initiate sex when she felt like she wanted it. These plans worked fairly well. Linda eventually recognized that she did indeed have a sex drive, which was not as low as she had thought, though not as high as Ed hoped it would be. Sex continued to be an issue between them, but their differences generated less hurt and resentment.

Ed and Linda agreed that their problems really began after Lauren's birth. Linda experienced a lowering of her interest in sex and guilt about her decision to return to work, while fatherhood intensified Ed's fear of failure and his need to be as perfect as he thought his own father had been. They had many disagreements over how to raise Lauren. For example, Ed thought they needed to "train" Lauren not to be bad (as he had been), while Linda read child-care books and normalized everything Lauren did. So, when Lauren had a tantrum, Ed often would lose his patience and yell at her, while Linda stepped in to defend her. As much as he resented his parents' criticism, Ed found himself repeating what they had done. Linda saw that, like her mother, she preferred not to vocalize problems and to act as if everything was okay, ignoring any indication to die contrary.

The more they understood their differences about childrearing, the more they began to moderate their behavior toward Lauren. I encouraged each of them to have his or her own relationship with Lauren and stressed that the other should not interfere with that. I also suggested that Ed develop a more personal (and therefore more balanced) relationship with his father, which meant spending time with him and talking without blame about some of the unresolved issues between them. When I asked Ed about his issues with his father, he cited his father's negativity and pessimism, which Ed believed he had inherited. My first suggestion was for Ed to spend some time alone with his father and talk to him about the problems that Ed was having with being hypercritical and gloomy. Eight months into the therapy, after Ed had begun some of this work, his father died. Although Ed certainly did not deny his grief (as he had about Nadine), he did minimize it, and I regretted not having pushed this part of the therapy harder.

Meanwhile, Ed and Linda's ability to face the fallout from the affair waxed and waned, depending on the level of stress in their lives. The tension between them increased, for example, whenever they thought Nadine was calling and hanging up, or asking mutual friends about them. It also increased when Ed's father died, and later at the time of the anniversary of Linda's discovery of the affair. I told them that such fluctuations are normal and explained the connections between stressful events and emotional reactions, while coaching them to use the relationship tools they now had the ability to analyze interaction patterns, to discuss diem and to reverse predictable behavior. When I asked Linda what she needed in order to start trusting Ed again, she said that it would help if Ed told her where he was going, who would be there and what time he would be home. This reminded Ed of reporting to his mother when he was an adolescent, but nevertheless he faithfully honored Linda's request. He grudgingly grew to accept the fact that Linda still sometimes had doubts and worries when he went out and that reestablishing trust would take time.

Once die crisis was past and their marriage was restabilized, it was appropriate for Linda to have her questions about

the affair answered. Ed said that, painful as it might be to "rehash things," he was willing to answer any questions she had. But Linda insisted she was not curious about anything, even after I emphasized that having questions is normal, and that, at this stage of treatment it is productive to deal with them. Her reluctance to voice her questions certainly fit with her style of not verbalizing problems and avoiding directly facing tough issues. Even when I



periodically went back to it in later sessions, her answer was always the same. From the very beginning of therapy, Ed blamed himself for the affair and expressed deep remorse that, at times, bordered on self-hatred. Ironically, such extreme emotionality can keep an affair alive by maintaining the focus on the remorse rather than on the issues that still need to be dealt with between the couple. A realistic view and acknowledgement of one's responsibility, and the expression of appropriate remorse is necessary to put the affair triangle behind the couple. Meanwhile, Linda had a tendency to help perpetuate the dysfunctional marital triangle by expressing "hatred" for Nadine and wondering how a woman could have an affair with her friend's husband. This, of course, kept Nadine in her and Ed's lives mentally and emotionally. The best way to get Nadine out, I explained without much success, is to see her as a person, shaped by her own life history, with understandable assets and limitations just like everyone else. It is very rare that people can hear this from a therapist, because it sounds like the therapist is protecting the third party, and so it is very rare that people fully disentangle themselves from an affair triangle. The spouse who has had an affair invariably has a parallel, or symmetrical, trust issue with the non-affair spouse that has previously stayed underground. It was a challenge to the marital system to frame Ed's problem with their sex life as his difficulty trusting that Linda really cared about him and his needs. But at that point, Ed and Linda, at Linda's urging, decided to terminate therapy. It had been 13 months since they first came to see me. In my experience, Ed and Linda's case was typical of couples still maintaining their commitment in the face of the crisis of infidelity. They had weathered a very difficult time, but chose to terminate therapy before they had completed what I considered to be the "whole program." It is naive to regard couples therapy as something that fixes all die problems in a relationship. I appreciated how exhausted Ed and Linda were from dealing with the trauma of the affair and respected their decision to terminate. When a couple like Ed and Linda successfully manage a crisis in their lives together, they are more likely to return if they wish to make further changes. I would not be surprised to see Ed and Linda again in my office one day.

COMMENTARY I

BY FRANK PITTMAN

FAY SHOWS GREAT SENSITIVITY TO THE pitfalls of treating the crisis of infidelity, while he expertly avoids most of the dangers. Less sensitive therapists often believe certain myths about infidelity that can cripple the therapy and destroy the marriage. Some even accept the idea that infidelity is normal, expectable behavior, not really worth mentioning, while jealousy and guilt are the real pathology, indicating sick dependency and control. Some therapists don't take strong stands against affairs, dishonesty or the continuation of any relationship with the affairee who intruded the marriage. Many believe affairs are caused by imperfect marriages, and that the cuckold, who wasn't even there, must share the responsibility for it. Some therapists assume affairs are about sex, and ignore the psychopathic, suicidal or passive-aggressive underpinnings of the decision to betray the marriage. Other therapists see infidelity as proof of character flaws too serious and unchangeable to treat, so they try to extract angry cuckolds from their damaged marriages.

Fay does none of these things and is willing to deal with infidelity openly, rather than doing what so many skittish therapists do bypass it, fail to ask about it and pride themselves on helping people get all the way through a divorce without ever revealing anything that might help them understand one another. When a therapist finds infidelity frightening, and will even conspire to keep it secret, then infidelity is clearly unforgivable and intimacy between us flawed mortals impossible.

Fay does get perilously close to a blaming-the-victim position when he tells us, "The spouse who has had an affair invariably has a parallel, or symmetrical, trust issue with the non-affair spouse that has previously stayed underground." I've worked with a lot of infidelity cases and I haven't noticed that. In fact, I haven't noticed that marriages in which affairs occur are closer or more distant, happier or unhappier, more nor less conflicted than others.

Many woman have affairs as they give up on their marriages, discount their husbands, and look for a painless route out. But most men have affairs after assuring themselves their marriages are solid, while they struggle with issues of their masculinity, and mourn their fathers or the lack of closeness with them. When a man is unfaithful,



the problem is more likely to be in his relationship with his father than with his wife. This was certainly the case here with Ed, as Fay understood.

Fay avoided the danger of this crisis, but I don't think he fully exploited its opportunities. He tells us that "the disclosure of an extramarital affair can create an explosive crisis undermining the foundation of trust necessary to sustain a relationship." Actually, it is not the *disclosure* that undermines the trust, but the affair itself. The disclosure is the first step in creating the *intimacy*, or knowing of one another that will replace the trust that has been screwed away.

Fay keeps the emotional level so low, in the therapy and in the marriage, that the couple does not use this crisis to achieve greater intimacy. The couple, at the end of the year of therapy, is still sad and distant. Ed has no real feelings about Nadine, which is not uncommon in affairs affairees are likely to be fleeting fantasy figures rather than real people in an infidel's life. But he has no real feelings about Linda either, just about the sex he needs to make him feel like a man. Ed is- a painfully needy man, but his only way of connecting with anyone else is sexual, and Linda (like her mother) pulls back from male desperation. Ed has not learned from his crisis or from his therapy to communicate his needs effectively. The therapeutic maneuver that might solve this problem would be to have Ed reveal all the emotional and physical details of the affair to Linda, letting him think and talk about how he experienced this turning point in his life, and letting Linda come to know and understand this husband she distrusts and distances.

There will be further crises, which may or may not involve further infidelity. Eventually, Ed will have to come to grips with his relationship with his father, which was overshadowed here by Fay's concern with the infidelity. Fay achieves his goal of keeping "the anxiety in check," but he does not teach these sad and lonely people very much about intimacy. He leaves Ed still depressed, mourning (not Nadine, but his father), ashamed, alone and still unaware of what he feels and unable to reach out to his wife.

Crises of infidelity require our sympathy with people who have faced a turning point in their lives and hurt themselves and their loved ones by making a wrong turn. But we have to be aware that people may betray their marriages not because the marriage is flawed (all marriages are), but because they have reached a point of desperation in which they can't continue the life they have been living, and are not willing to commit suicide yet. The inevitable uproar, guilt, anxiety and anger may do little to relieve the underlying desperation. Therapy, while cleaning up the mess of the affair, should not fail to address the desperation.

COMMENTARY II

BY THELMA JEAN GOODRICH

KURT VONNEGUT MAINTAINS THAT when one spouse says to the other, "I'm unhappy being married to you," the statement behind the statement is, "You're not enough people for me." Yes, that old familiar feeling: "I need more attention than what I'm getting from (only) you more company, more stimulation. I just need more." In the case of Ed and Linda, both seem to think that Linda is not enough for Ed and he needs at least two people. So if he must pare down to one, that one will somehow have to do the work of two.

Fay quite rightly observes that therapists and clients need a clear framework for dealing with the aftermath of an affair. In many ways, his protocol is an excellent guide through this process. There are, however, three modifications that I would make.

First, I would assess the distribution of power between wife and husband. As they come together to renegotiate the terms of their marriage, do Ed and Linda come as equals with equal money, equal ability to know and state their desires, an equal stake in the marriage? Usually, compared with her husband, the wife has less money she regards as her own and feels less entitled to set forth terms for the relationship. Typically, she has a greater stake in the survival of the marriage because divorce imposes a greater financial, social and parental burden on her than on him. How does an affair affect the balance of power? Sometimes, the status of the wife may get raised, at least temporarily, by her husband's disclosure of an affair. It appears, however, that this is not the case with Linda. She goes to great lengths to excuse Ed, blaming his affair on 1) her own failures as a sexual partner, 2) her inadequacy as an ego booster, 3) Nadine.



A further indication of her low status is evident in the apparent assumption that only Ed has a decision to make about whether or not the marriage would continue. Linda is the receiver of Ed's decision, not someone who must wrestle with a decision of her own. Ed's choice of her over Nadine seemed to settle the matter for Linda.

I would work with Ed and Linda to make explicit what aspects of their relationship are unequal, what part such inequalities had in producing the conditions for the affair, and what effect they will have on intimacy, sex, problem-solving and the children, even if no further affair occurs. Usually, the picture of their relationship that emerges in this process contrasts so sharply with their idealized view of themselves that a couple is motivated to correct the imbalance.

The second area I would focus on would be to help Linda locate her hurt and anger. It is crucial for her to talk about these feelings and for Ed to hear them in order for both of them to remove her from the category of object the "explanation" for the affair, the "failure" against whom Ed acted, the unresponsive wife to whom Ed was sending a message. Instead, both Linda and Ed need to see her as someone who has her own story and is the center of her own experience. Even to invite her to ask questions about Ed and Nadine, as Fay suggests, supports the view that Linda's shortcomings caused the affair.

Third, the area of sex needs further discussion. If Linda is to work on intensifying her sex "drive," a fair-minded compromise would require Ed to work simultaneously on moderating his, not just on refraining from initiation, which is easily read by any wife as exactly that, refraining. Meanwhile the pressure remains, in our culture, the husband's level of desire is taken as set-point, buttressed by his entitlement to satisfaction. Thus, it falls to the wife to match his "drive," pretend to match it, or suffer a penalty. Even in therapy, the wife's deviation from her husband's "drive" is typically seen as the problem to solve. Fay's idea of putting Linda in charge of initiating sexual contact does not challenge this construction of the rights and privileges of husbands. Without an understanding of that, Linda's self-proclaimed increase in sexual desire is impossible to interpret, even by her.

To address the politics of sex, which is central to the presenting problem Ed and Linda bring to therapy, I would pose a series of questions designed to make commonly implicit assumptions about marriage explicit. As a couple struggles with answers, they are able to examine how an imbalance of power in the sexual relationship creates tensions and binds there just as it does in other aspects of the relationship. I would ask such questions as: "Linda, if I ask you how sex is for you with Ed, how would I know if you were answering me with a good wife voice, a

scared voice or your own voice?"

"Ed, how do you tell whether Linda is having sex with you as a kindness to you, out of fear of losing you or out of her own desire? Do you care which it is?"

"Linda, what other transaction in your marriage feels to you most nearly like the transactions about sex? How would changes in either one affect the other one?"

"Ed, what if Linda didn't want sex at times, but thought she should have sex anyway out of duty or fear? What do you think she should do? What if you found out that she was fearful of your anger or of your straying if she said 'no' and you wanted her to feel safe instead, what would you do? What would you gain?"

"Linda, what if Ed only wanted you to have sex when you really wanted to, how would that affect your desire?"

As a preventative to the you're-not-enough-people-for-me dead-end, Vonnegut once told a young couple who had been married only two weeks, "Get as many people in your life as you can, both of you." His advice could help Ed and Linda, who seem to regard the marital contract as a promise to fill each other's every emotional and sexual need, an expectation that shows itself in Linda and Ed's shared belief that Linda's slacking off from attending to Ed prompted his affair. Both ignore the fact that Linda felt unattended to as well. Future resentments and troubles loom if their basic conception of the marital contract remains unchallenged.

As they renegotiate their marriage, Ed and Linda may need help in recognizing that some needs will never be met anywhere, that lots of needs can be and should be met by people other than one's spouse, that such relationships need not be sexualized, that sexual fidelity, in fact, does usually make for left-over desire. Regarding the latter, as Fay tells Ed, various options exist other than an affair. A friend of mine used to say to her persistent 4-year-old, "Why do you always have to treat hunger as a problem to solve? Can't you just *be* hungry for a little while?"



AUTHOR'S RESPONSE

BY LEO FAY

I APPRECIATE THE FREE SUPERVISION from two fine therapist-thinkers. I was especially grateful for Goodrich's point about power and its connections with sex, and for Pittman's focus on the affair as an opportunity for teaching about intimacy.

While I agree with Goodrich that gender is sometimes the major determinant of power distribution in both marriage and therapy, power should not be equated with gender roles. While women often have fewer financial resources and more parenting responsibilities, as Goodrich points out, men typically have fewer emotional resources and greater emotional neediness. Gender is one variable among many affecting power, and family therapy still awaits a clear understanding of those variables. Nevertheless, Goodrich is absolutely right in tying power and sexual complaints together. Her process questions are terrific examples of the sort of clinical research questions therapists dealing with couples need to ask more often.

There is a real conundrum in Pittman's observation that in keeping "the emotional level so low, in the therapy and in the marriage,... the couple does not use this crisis to achieve greater intimacy." My own experience is that, in just about every marital crisis, the emotional level is so high that thinking and therefore change is impossible. Lowering the emotional level is a prerequisite for achieving the focus on self, the reestablishment of trust and detriangling that are essential to reconstruct the marriage.

Timing, and the personal style of the therapist, are the real issues here. The problem at one extreme is that the therapist who is anxious about a couple's lack of intimacy may move too quickly to work on it directly. This may produce a fairly rapid and intense closeness, followed by an equally rapid and intense recycling of their problems that can blow the marriage out of the water. At the other extreme is the therapist who waits too long to focus on emotional issues with the result that the couple goes away with symptom relief but without any change in their level of marital intimacy.

I have always understood that couples like Ed and Linda leave therapy before they face issues of intimacy (both emotional and physical), because they are exhausted and relieved that they have gotten through the crisis of infidelity without divorcing. Sometimes I've gotten psychodynamic and thought that their leaving early had to do with their fear of intimacy. Pittman's comments suggest to me, however, that it might have to do with the *therapist's* fear of intimacy. Of course, as an ex-Jesuit, Irish-Catholic from Boston, I've never had any trouble with that.

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