

The Reality of Affairs



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The following is a transcript from an interview with infidelity expert Rick Reynolds, LCSW conducted by Will Davis Jr., Senior Pastor of Austin Christian Fellowship.

Will: Rick Reynolds, what do you do?

Rick: I'm a marriage and family therapist specializing in infidelity and sexual addiction.

Will: How many years have you been counseling people in the area of infidelity, Rick? And how did you get involved in this particular specialty?

Rick: About twenty-four years. I became interested in this area of therapy after my own affair. So my journey began with my own recovery. Later, I was fortunate enough to be able to use much of what I discovered to help others in their journeys as well.

Will: So, in your bazillion years of experience, how many couples do you think you've treated that have been through a marital affair of any some kind?

Rick: Probably somewhere in the range of two thousand couples.

Will: Wow, two thousand couples. You used a word a minute ago—*infidelity*. That contains all kinds of overtones to me. Define it for us. What is infidelity?

Rick: Infidelity, as Frank Pittman MD, (another one of the leading authorities in the field of infidelity and the author of [Private Lies](#)) says, is nothing more than the "keeping of secrets."

Will: Okay, you just lost me. I thought infidelity was having sex with somebody outside your marriage.

Rick: Having sex outside of marriage is one form

of infidelity, but there are many ways to be unfaithful to your mate. You can hide what you're doing financially, or a friendship you know your mate wouldn't approve of. Keeping information and behaviors from your mate, especially if you know they would object, is infidelity.

Will: If I cheat on my income tax, or if I buy a bicycle and don't tell my wife how I paid for it, I'm being an infidel?

Rick: At one level, yes. But typically the most painful form of infidelity is sexual or relational in nature. Some people complain about the use of the term *infidelity*, saying it minimizes the magnitude of the action, but in reality, infidelity is much broader than just someone having sex outside of marriage.

Will: Why is having sex outside of marriage worse for a marriage than a guy not telling his wife how he paid for the bicycle?

Rick: Sexual or emotional betrayal is quite different from lying about how you paid for a bike or about hidden debt. Sexual or emotional infidelity deals with the very essence of our being.

Will: How so?

Rick: Human beings are relational in nature. We need secure attachments just to survive. Without these attachments, we will die. Studies have even found that children in an orphanage who are never picked up will fail to thrive and will die. The worst punishment you can give an adult is solitary confinement. Without emotional



attachment, we can't survive. All of us—adults as well as children—need those safe attachments. So how does infidelity relate to this? Infidelity damages or destroys that primary attachment, leaving the betrayed partner completely disoriented. It can literally feel like they lost their equilibrium or identity.

Will: Obviously our culture is changing and evolving. How do you think our culture's perception of infidelity or adultery has changed today?

Rick: I think the media reflects the changing attitudes regarding infidelity. At one level it seems cheating has become more acceptable—maybe not for the person being cheated on—but certainly the internet and cell phones present far more opportunities and new venues for infidelity to occur. The secrecy and privacy provided by today's technology make such behavior seem far less dangerous or hurtful.

Will: What are the elements of an affair?

Rick: Affairs have three primary components:

1. Secrecy: Suppose two people are spending hours on the phone talking and texting, but they never tell their partners about their new relationship. Even if nothing sexual has occurred, their partner won't be happy about it. He or she will still feel betrayed.

2. Emotional Intimacy: Sharing information with another person that you're reluctant to share with your partner creates an emotional intimacy that is greater than that with your partner. Such intimacy will be hurtful and threatening to your partner. A frequent path to an affair comes from sharing negative details about your current relationship. That's the equivalent of saying, "I'm vulnerable and hurting and may be available in the near future."

3. Sexual Chemistry: This has nothing to do with touching; it's more about expressing attraction. Often it begins with a statement like, "I had a dream about you last night, but of course, I'm married, so we won't do anything about that." This type of an expression of attention or attraction greatly increases the probability of an affair. In fact, it's the *expression* of desire for

another person that determines the beginning point of an affair.

Will: How does that differ from sexual addiction?

Rick: Sexual addiction is more about an ongoing pattern of behaviors characterized by:

- A persistent preoccupation with or persistently craving sex; wanting to cut down but unsuccessfully attempting to limit sexual activity.
- Frequently engaging in more sex and with more partners than intended.
- Thinking of sex to the detriment of other activities or continually engaging in excessive sexual practices despite a desire to stop.
- Neglecting obligations such as work, school, or family in pursuit of sex.
- Continually engaging in the sexual behavior despite negative consequences, such as broken relationships or potential health risks.
- Feeling irritable when unable to engage in the desired behavior.
- Escalating scope or frequency of sexual activity to achieve the desired effect, such as more frequent visits to prostitutes or more sex partners.

If a person has three or more of these symptoms, he or she may be dealing with an addiction.

Will: You say "he or she." Can a woman have a "sexual addiction"?

Rick: Yes, but it tends to have more of a relational component. Some trend more to "love addiction," which is really the same thing, but for them it can be more about the emotional high they get from the relationship.

Will: How does recovery from sexual addiction differ from recovery after an affair?

Rick: For the couple there is little difference. The emotional impact to the hurt spouse is the same—a betrayal is a betrayal. The magnitude of the betrayal is more a factor of the psychological makeup of the hurt spouse. Regardless, the couple will need to address the betrayal to assure the relationship is safe.



The difference is the path of recovery for the unfaithful spouse. Sex addicts need the support of a twelve-step program to help them develop the skills necessary to recover. On the other hand, the individual in an entangled relationship may need help disconnecting from the affair partner and determining the cause of the affair.

Will: What does all of this do to our society? If marriage bonds are becoming more negotiable and infidelity more in vogue, how does that affect social fabric?

Rick: I believe it creates an immature culture and a self-centered, self-absorbed culture. I believe marriage is God's primary people-growing machine. It's the primary vehicle he uses to help mature us and teach us to love. When we begin to pursue our own self-satisfaction and happiness, we cease growing emotionally. Divorce keeps a lot of people forever immature.

Will: Immature?

Rick: We remain self-centered, never learning how to love. We become a loveless culture, limited in our ability to care about others, focusing only on ourselves.

Will: Are there common threads or characteristics you see in people that have affairs?

Rick: Not in the way you would think. It's not as if bad people have affairs. I know some really fine people that ended up in an affair. The common characteristics are better seen in their response to having the affair. Most are people who find it difficult to be honest about what they've done. At one level, they're afraid to be a disappointment and they do everything possible to manage their image so their actions won't hurt those involved with them. Problem is, you can't address the problem if you can't own the problem and begin to deal with it.

Will: Rick, you mentioned there are different types of affairs. Can you tell me about them?

Rick: Some affairs occur because someone is just dissatisfied with their marriage; some believe they've found someone else who makes them feel better about themselves. Because of the feelings generated by the affair, the unfaithful mate believes they have "fallen in love." We would call that a "Type Two" affair . . .

Will: So sometimes a person falls in love with someone besides their partner? Is that real? Do people "fall in love"? I thought love was a choice. Forgive me for interrupting you, but that falling in love . . . That sounds like a Disney thing.

Rick: Okay, let's explain "falling in love." Basically, the term you're talking about here is *limerence*, a word coined by psychologist Dorothy Tennov in the late seventies. People can actually fall into limerence. Limerence is a physiological reaction where someone experiences a strong attraction to another person. It is what we frequently refer to as infatuation. It's a God-created mechanism intended to help us initially bond with our mate. The only problem is, being married doesn't preclude the limerent reaction from being activated.

Will: Is it *eros*?

Rick: It's definitely *eros*. It's not about what's in the best interest of the other person. It's what I've got to have in order to be fulfilled.

Will: Okay, so it's about me.

Rick: It's totally about me. It's where someone thinks they've found their one true soulmate, and in their mind they've fallen in love with that person. If marriage has been a disappointment, then they make the cognitive leap of believing they'll be happier with this other person.

The problem is, research has shown that limerence lasts no longer than three years. Even worse, one of the primary problems with limerence is a condition called "crystallization"—people cannot be objective about the other person while they are smitten. It's not that they fail to see the other person's faults or weaknesses; it's that in the limerent state, those problems are of no concern. Instead, they see those qualities as endearing or unique. Later, however, after the limerence has faded, they're stuck with facing a disappointing reality.

Even more of a problem, it's difficult to break out of this type of relationship. It's as if they are addicted to the other person. They may mutually agree to break off the affair, but find they have to call to check up on the other person. When they are with their affair partner, they feel guilty; when they are with their mate, they're miserable. So they handle the misery as long as possible and then go back to the affair partner,



where they experience ecstasy. Then when the guilt overtakes them, they go back to their mate. Eventually a pattern develops where they're rendered incapable of making a decision.

Will: How is the cycle ever broken?

Rick: Affairs never end bilaterally; it's always a unilateral decision. If the two affair partners decide together to end the affair, then in reality they've just created a covert alliance to continue working together toward a common goal. Consequently there always will be a pull to check to see how the other person is doing on their end, which extends the communication between them. Now they've got this noble cause to work toward. But if one party on their own determines they're done, then the show is over. They are no longer dependent on the other person's decisions or actions. Now they're acting on their own.

Will: What if someone is caught in an affair and agrees to end it? Is that person able to break it off?

Rick: Sometimes, but that's the exception. As the saying goes, "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." I can't tell you how many cases I've treated where someone is caught, and then with their mate on the phone, they tell the affair partner it's over, only to re-establish contact later, under the reasoning that they are checking to see how the other person is doing. These relationships carry real emotions, and even when contact is cut off, the feelings can linger for a time.

Also, it can be especially easy for a person to justify contacting the affair partner if they're committed to staying in their marriage. They see this action as a more civil way of ending the affair. They genuinely feel bad for the negative impact they've had on the other party and want to make it better.

Will: What's another type of affair?

Rick: Some people really love their marriage, but they carelessly put themselves in a high-risk situation and bad things happen. They're on a business trip and go out with the guys, only to find themselves at a topless club, or they are alone at a company party and get drunk and find themselves flirting with someone else. Frequently these people have never done anything like this before, but they end up having a one-night stand.

Generally they're horrified at what they've done. Do they tell the spouse or do they take the secret to their grave?

Will: Isn't that kind of one-night stand a symptom of a flawed character issue or a failure in moral restraint?

Rick: Not necessarily. I know some really good folk who have fallen into that one. Many things are quite capable of impairing the best judgment—such as alcohol, fatigue, or defeat. Frequently these are actions the person would have never considered if they hadn't been in that particular high-risk situation.

Will: What about sexual addiction?

Rick: Sexual and love addiction are more about the baggage brought into the relationship. Some have had a double existence all their life; others are exposed later in life to the addictive agent and then develop their secret life. Sexual addicts frequently believe they can substitute good sex for bad sex, so perhaps they marry, expecting everything to be fine. Once they get married, they discover that the marriage relationship doesn't scratch the same itch and that all they did was add to their sexual repertoire. Now they have good sex *and* bad sex. It's not that such individuals don't want the marriage; but they couldn't stop the behavior before the marriage, and therefore marriage won't be the higher power capable of stopping it now.

Individuals who are truly addicts need additional help to stop their compulsive sexual and/or relational behavior. They will need the support of a program capable of helping them get rid of their shame, get honest, and acknowledge their need for help.

In these situations it's important for betrayed mates to remember that the addictive spouses' behaviors aren't about them. This is about baggage an addict had before the marriage, and most likely these behaviors would have been exhibited regardless of who they married.

Will: I never thought about breaking down affairs into categories. I've always just lumped them under the category of being unfaithful.

Rick: Actually the categories are important because they can help identify the root problem and the best solution for that particular type of



infidelity. For instance, someone involved in a one-night stand or in sexual addiction will generally be more than motivated to address the problem because they care about their mate and don't want to lose the marriage. Someone in a limerant relationship may be more ambivalent about the marriage and will have the task of disconnecting from the affair partner.

Will: Is there another category for infidelity?

Rick: The final category is inappropriate friendships. Anytime you have to put the word *just* in front of the word *friend*, there's a problem. These affairs begin because of shared experiences. There's a lot of opportunity nowadays. For instance, people end up being what I call "geographic bachelors." Work takes them out on the road and they end up being alone most nights and meeting someone else who, for whatever reason, they can relate to. So the two develop a friendship. It's not that they don't care about their mates—and there may be nothing wrong with either marriage—but out of their own neediness or loneliness . . . or they have an officemate, someone they work with that they respect and find fun. They have a great relationship at work, and it's far more exciting than what happens when they get home at the end of the day. Then one has to take care of kids and change diapers and clean the house, and everyone's exhausted, including the spouse. So the activities that energize someone are those spent with the person at work, not the challenging times spent at home. Those people will typically argue that they're "just friends." "We're just friends; there's nothing wrong."

This is the basis for the fourth and fifth categories of affairs. In this situation, they share something in common with the other person that they don't have with their own mate, such as work or music. For that reason they begin to share that aspect of their life with the affair partner, and the rest of their life with the mate. What then may happen is that the portion shared with their "friend" is more enjoyable than the portion of their life shared with their mate. They tend to invest more energy in this other relationship than with their mate. Eventually, when they find more pleasure in the relationship with their affair partner, they believe it's because the affair partner has more ability to bring them happiness. They overvalue that relationship and undervalue the marital

relationship. The problem, however, lies in their underinvestment in the relationship at home. If they were putting as much energy and time in the relationship at home as with the outside "friend," they'd find the marital relationship far more valuable.

Remember, one person can never meet all your needs. So if you believe you've got to have it all in order to be happy, then you're going to have to get another person to fill in the gap. There has to be a shift in focus. My needs are far better met in trying to love others rather than trying to get others to love me.

Will: At least.

Rick: In my opinion, a deeper problem lies in what goal people set for their marriage relationship. I don't believe the goal should be about how the other person makes me feel about myself. Rather, I believe it's more about how well I can love the other person. Loving is the goal, not how well can they love me or boost my self-image.

In many ways affair partners are like mirrors. They help us see ourselves the way we want to be seen. Psychologist and author Shirley Glass describes affair partners as a "vanity mirror," the type of mirror you look in where the lighting helps you look better. But marriage partners are more like makeup mirrors, which reveal all the flaws. It's always going to be tempting to look in the vanity mirror so I can feel better about myself.

Will: You mentioned a Shirley Glass analogy about walls and windows, what is that about?

Rick: With affairs there is always secretiveness so the spouse has little or no clue what's going on in the affair. All of those secrets are being shared between the unfaithful mate and the affair partner. It's a part of the dynamic that keeps their alliance alive. It's as if there's a wall blocking the hurt spouse's view into their mate's extramarital relationship. But there's a one way mirror in that wall that allows the affair partner to see all the detail of the marital relationship.

To begin the process of rebuilding trust that one way mirror needs to be reversed where the hurt spouse sees into the affair and the affair partner's view of the marriage is blocked. Answering the questions for the hurt spouse is a



way to begin that process. In a sense it's about who's on the inside and who's on the outside. As long as the unfaithful mate continues to hold secrets about the affair they maintain a covert alliance with their affair partner. Loyalty is re-established as the bonds of secrecy are broken.

Will: There's a lot of talk these days about women and their willingness to have affairs. Do you think there's an increase in women initiating affairs outside of their own marriages, and if so, why? Are women changing?

Rick: Yes, definitely the fastest-growing population of people having affairs is women ages twenty-seven to thirty-five. I think a lot of it has to do with the additional opportunities presented by the women's movement. Men and women travel together and work together. Media portrays the whole glory of having those affairs. *Desperate Housewives* . . .

Will: *Sex and the City* . . .

Rick: *Sex and the City*. Exactly. Our media portrays real women in that light, and if you're not that type of person, then somehow you're not a real woman. So, I think the way women are portrayed encourages extramarital affairs.

Will: Is there a failure on men's parts in marriage that is leading more women into affairs? We're too busy, we're distracted, whatever?

Rick: I think both parties tend to misunderstand what marriage is about. If we look to marriage to be the source of our happiness, then the probability of affairs occurring is high. Our culture has come to believe that marriage is the place where we're supposed to get our needs met. I heard someone say once, "You better make sure the hat hook can hold the weight of the hat before you're hanging up that hat." In today's world we put far too many demands on the institution of marriage. In past times it was almost a necessity for survival. Life was hard and husbands and wives were far more dependent on a division of labor to get by. Today marriage is far less about survival and more about a choice. Marriage is no longer a necessity; now we look for it to give us life. We look to marriage to meet all of our needs for love, excitement, friendship, intimacy, eroticism, entertainment, validation, affirmation, stability, and security. However, it's difficult for one relationship to meet all those requirements. Additionally, with the changing

roles for men and women, there's confusion about who's responsible for what. One thing we know for sure—our mate's sure not carrying the fair share of the load. Or at least that's the perception of many inside marriages today.

Will: Does a person's moral standing or religious inclination dictate how he or she responds to infidelity in the marriage—their own or their spouse's?

Rick: Absolutely. People with a strong moral compass are more tempted and therefore more likely to have affairs.

Will: Really? People who have a strong moral basis tend to have more affairs than people who don't? That seems backward. Explain that to me.

Rick: Because it's human nature to want to do what we're not supposed to do, so the more strongly you believe it's wrong, the more powerful the draw to that behavior. Yes, it's counterintuitive, but someone's involvement in church or some religious institution in no way precludes them from being unfaithful, and in some ways it makes it more difficult to stay faithful. By the way, my faith and convictions are very important to me, so I'm not saying that the solution to fidelity is moral relativism.

Will: Very interesting. Is there anything good about an affair? Is there anything that a couple can go through in an affair and say, "You know, this has actually been really good for our marriage"? I've actually heard psychologists say that the best thing you can do for your marriage is have an affair.

Rick: No. The best thing you can do for your marriage is *not* to have an affair. Those are two different questions. Can anything good come from an affair? Absolutely. The best marriages I know have actually come through an affair.

Will: But you said before that it's best not to. Now it sounds like you're saying, "Hey, if you want to strengthen your marriage, have an affair."

Rick: Not at all. You don't want to have an affair to strengthen your marriage. If you have an affair, it rips the very fabric of your being, and some people are never able to recover from that wound. However, those able to work through infidelity—when it does happen, even though it



never should—find new meaning, a new understanding of love, a deeper sense of commitment. They can have a phenomenal marriage. But, at the same time, when people come up to them in the future and say, “Man, we’d love to have a marriage like yours. How do we get it?” they’d be the first to say, “You’d never want to go through what you have to go through to get this type of marriage.”

Our culture is a little bit insane because we’re far more tolerant of divorce than we are of making the effort to save a marriage after a betrayal. The typical response to infidelity is always divorce: “Well, just divorce the bum,” as if that’s a foregone conclusion. But divorce is a course where lifestyles are completely altered; children are thrown under the bus and meaningful relationships are destroyed.

Conversely, there are ways to get over infidelity and develop the relationship you’ve always wanted. I’m not minimizing infidelity; it’s a horrible thing. I’m certainly not saying that infidelity in any way is okay; it’s not. Still, why we think divorce is a better alternative than trying to work through an infidelity perplexes me.

Will: What are indicators of a couple’s ability to successfully move beyond an affair?

Rick: First is responsibility. If the unfaithful partner fails to take responsibility and is defensive, then it’s difficult for the couple to even get on the right track. If all they do is blame the mate for their betrayal, then their denial of any responsibility will prevent them from ever being a safe partner again. Without someone taking responsibility, there can never be a behavior change.

Second is empathy. The hurt spouse has to feel that the unfaithful spouse not only understands the pain he or she has caused, but also is grieved over the impact this has had on the hurt spouse.

Marital history is a third indicator. If both of them can identify a season in the marriage where they did well as a couple, then the probability of their being able to reconcile increases. This positive history gives them a point of hope to build from. They know that something positive between the two of them is possible.

However, out of these three indicators, empathy

is number one, and being able to take responsibility and taking action to make the relationship safe is number two.

Will: What are some negative indicators to a marriage surviving infidelity?

Rick: If an affair occurs earlier in a marriage, it’s potentially more damaging, and the success rate is lower if the woman is the unfaithful partner.

Will: Because?

Rick: As a whole, I think men have more trouble forgiving. In some ways, I think they have more trouble moving beyond their masculine wound. Also, men tend to compartmentalize more, and frequently even though they may be having an affair, they still want to be married. When women have affairs, they are more likely to feel they are done with the marriage. Often women will spend years complaining about the lack of connection and the man will refuse to respond. When she finally quits complaining, he makes the mistake of thinking things must have gotten better, when in reality she is dying on the vine. Women tend to disconnect from the marriage before they reconnect in an affair.

Will: Do you think spouses are forced into affairs by their mates? Meaning, is it always the spouse’s fault?

Rick: Infidelity is *never* the spouse’s fault. Certainly there be serious marital issues and a spouse may be difficult to live with, but an unfaithful spouse chooses the damaging course of an affair for dealing with the problems. There are far more productive ways to deal with marital issues than an affair.

Will: So if I’m married to the Wicked Witch of the West, I’m not justified in having an affair?

Rick: No!

Will: Even though my friends say, “Look, Jack, you can do better. Go out and . . . you deserve this. You deserve better, go get it.”

Rick: Avoiding the problem by having an affair is never a loving or mature solution. Confront the issues in the marriage rather than avoiding them. . Or if you don’t want the marriage, at least have the courage to express where you’re at, but don’t go breaking your vows. You may very well



find that your honesty about your discontentedness may bring about the change you've been wanting.

Will: If I'm miserable in my marriage, is divorce is better than infidelity? You're not condoning divorce?

Rick: No. First off, you're making a huge assumption that there's something wrong if I'm miserable in my marriage. All marriages go through seasons where the partners can be miserable. There are times that life deals us a hand of misery.

Will: Why would an affair happen in a good marriage?

Rick: Affairs are not about bad marriages; they're about bad choices. Sometimes one partner will certainly feel they have a good marriage, but their partner has failed to communicate their dissatisfaction. Or they may have expressed their dissatisfaction, but the other partner failed to listen. Either way, once the affair begins, typically the unfaithful spouse will begin rewriting the marital history to help justify their actions.

Sometimes affairs occur out of carelessness. All it takes is putting oneself in a high-risk situation and limerance is triggered. It's not that they didn't like their marriage or don't care about their mate, but now there's someone else they're really attracted to. They begin to share something in common with the affair partner that they don't have with the mate. At that point, they begin to justify having the affair.

Will: Do affairs always involve sex?

Rick: Sometimes they're all about sex. Shirley Glass's research revealed that 44 percent of men reported slight or no emotional involvement; only 11 percent of women reported the same. For women the relationships seem to be predominantly about love. Regarding sex, one thing's for sure—oral sex is always about sex. Frequently a mate will be more disturbed about oral sex than about intercourse because it seems far more intimate.

Will: Okay. Let's pull the shroud back and take me to that moment when spouse A tells spouse B that they've been unfaithful. What is the part

that the media doesn't tell us? Describe the devastation of that moment, typically, when spouse B, who is being faithful, finds out spouse A is being unfaithful. What's the damage?

Rick: Well, infidelity creates a pain like no other. Death is easier than infidelity, believe it or not. Betrayal penetrates to the essence of identity. It also destroys one's understanding of the couple's life history—everything he or she believed about the relationship has now been destroyed with the discovery of the affair.

Will: What you thought was real is not real.

Rick: Exactly. It's not real. Therefore one of the primary tasks in a couple's recovery is the rewriting of the marital history. Until the couple can come to a joint understanding of what has happened in the marriage, it's almost impossible for them to move on.

Will: Doesn't that argue for not telling? Suppose you've got a person reading this article and they're going, "Look, your friends are saying you messed up. It was a one-night stand. You're going to kill your wife if you tell her this. Don't tell her. Just keep it to yourself; she's better off not knowing."

Rick: No, you're always better off telling.

Will: Why?

Rick: Well, I won't say always, but the exceptions are only about 5 percent. Remember that intimacy is the ability to know and to be known. Infidelity is the keeping of secrets. So if you have an affair and you've given a part of yourself away, a couple of things happen. One: you inhibit your ability to really be known by your mate. There's always a disconnect, a distance. And I promise you, the hurt spouse certainly is aware of that. You rob yourself of ever really being loved. You can never be loved unconditionally as long as you only conditionally let your mate know who you are.

Second, you rob the hurt spouse of their ability to make a choice. Why should you control your mate by the flow of information? That's not fair. At least give them an opportunity to decide what they would like. Your chances for a meaningful relationship go up at that point.

Will: So, in biblical language, being honest about



the affair is walking in the light, or coming into the light.

Rick: Yes, bringing light to your reality. Because anything short of that robs you of self-respect and integrity. Sadly, most people having affairs don't believe that they could really be loved if people knew who they really were.

Will: What are the statistical chances of the marriage surviving after betrayal, and what has to happen for the marriage to make it?

Rick: Our experience is somewhere between 85 and 90 percent survive if they take the time and effort to work at it.

Will: How long does that process typically take?

Rick: The repercussions seem to last for eighteen to twenty-four months. However, things aren't bad for all eighteen months. In fact, frequently, at the end of ninety days, couples will report having a far better marriage than ever before. The instability created by the infidelity, however, continues for months. It's impossible for either party to control the reminders and the trauma those events can trigger.

Will: What can a couple expect in this "new normal"? What should they hope for and look to, after working through the healing following an affair?

Rick: Typically these couples are much more intimate. They develop the skill of being far more honest about their feelings, wants, and desires. Before an affair, the couple may have been operating at an intimacy level of one or two. After the affair, hopefully, they're at a seven or eight, which is really one of the primary barometers that allows a hurt spouse to know they're safe in the marriage. This new level of intimacy allows them to be far more attuned if they begin to drift apart again.

Will: To the person who's in an affair, or considering having one, what would you say?

Rick: I would suggest they talk to their mate about the feelings they have about this other person.

Will: They're going to say, "Why in the heck would I do that?"

Rick: Well, I'd say, "If you think they'd like to know, why wouldn't you tell them?"

Will: "Because they'll get mad. They'll get angry. They'll throw me out. I'm also somewhat attracted to this person. I'm not sure I want to tell my spouse."

Rick: Right. I have occasionally told my wife about someone I'm attracted to. In this life we're going to have people in life we're attracted to. That doesn't mean I don't choose my wife. Why in the world would I be telling her that if I wasn't trying to protect the marriage and choose her?

Will: You think we should just lay it out there and tell them?

Rick: Heck yeah, I do, if I want to stay married. Finding someone else attractive isn't the problem. The problem comes from giving that information power by keeping it in the dark.

Will: So your advice to someone who's pushing the lines of relational appropriateness for someone other than their spouse is to tell the spouse?

Rick: Absolutely.

Will: Is there a plan B? Is there another . . . ?

Rick: Everybody wants a plan B because we don't really want to be known. We're too afraid of being a disappointment.

Will: For those of us who don't really want intimacy, what's the second option?

Rick: At the very least, expose your infidelity to a friend who cares about you. If you don't, it will rummage around in your heart until exposed. You'll never gain perspective until you bring it to the light. Funny thing how an attraction decreases once it's brought into the light.

Frequently I'll hear someone in my counseling office say, "I wish my mate only had eyes for me." I always come back saying, "That's crazy. Why would you want your mate to only have eyes for you? If that were the case, then they could never love. They'd be nothing more than a puppet on a string." It's natural for us to notice characteristics in others we find appealing or attractive. There is no way our mate can possess all the qualities we want, but a part of love is



accepting our mate as they are, not as we want them to be.

The deepest levels of love can only be revealed through choice. They're willing to sacrifice something or someone else just for the chance to be with you. Love is best revealed through a willingness to suffer for the opportunity to be with you.

Choice is not a feeling. At times I even make that choice in spite of my feeling. I don't control my emotional reactions; but love given, even when it's hard, has far more value than an overwhelming feeling.

Will: Even though admitting such a feeling is going to produce some chaos?

Rick: Intimacy is the ability to be known, remember? What we don't understand in marriage is that intimacy in marriage almost always creates short-term instability, but in the long run it creates an amazing bond.

Will: So, the couple that's breaking up today amid the nightmare of a newly revealed affair, what do you say to them?

Rick: Set your mind and your goals out in the future. Don't look at what's happening in any given moment of the situation. There is such instability when things first come out. It's up and down and all around. The intense level of pain can cause unbelievable reactions. At times you're getting divorced, and in the next moment you're holding each other and crying.

Will: Don't make decisions around that early time after the affair is discovered?

Rick: You don't make decisions at that point. You hang on for at least ninety days. I recommend that people wait eighteen months before they make a final decision about staying in the marriage. What you feel like doing can change twenty times in a day.

Will: Is there a difference, Rick, between the way men and women respond to affairs?

Rick: It's a bit of an overgeneralization, but men tend to compartmentalize and try to avoid it, while women need to process what has happened. Typically women deal with the trauma of the affair by talking about it a thousand times.

It's as if she needs to touch that wound over and over again until she doesn't get an emotional jolt when she talks about it. When men fail to understand this, it creates a real problem. When their wife brings it up over and over, men frequently begin to believe their mate is just trying to punish them. Their attitude seems to be, "Can't we just move on? I've already told you I was sorry." But when the unfaithful spouse tells their mate to get over it, all they are really communicating is that their discomfort with the topic is more important than their mate's pain.

A real problem can happen when you have a mate whose wife has been unfaithful. He doesn't want to deal with the pain, so he just tries to stuff it and move on. The woman's approach of processing the pain is actually healthier.

Will: She's really just trying to heal?

Rick: Yes. I listened to a woman complaining about her husband just the other day. "Why can't you get over it? You've had two months," he kept telling her. Somehow he's forgotten that he's been unfaithful for fifteen years. She's got fifteen years of history to work through and get her mind around. Until she can make sense of what happened, it will be difficult for her to move on to the next stage.

Will: Why do men have affairs? You tend to associate affair behavior with men and you tend to associate it with sex. What's the real reason that guys have affairs?

Rick: Again, it's probably a lot more complicated than one simple reason. Affairs are like drugs and have the ability to really alter one's state of mind. Affairs are based on romanticism, which is two people wanting what they don't have and being willing to make sacrifices to get it. Marriage is based on oneness, which is more like taking two cats and tying their tails together and saying, "Now, get along." It's far better to want what you don't have than to have who you don't want. When someone gets involved in an affair, they have another party who's like a mirror to them, making them feel about themselves as they want to feel. Their mate's mirror, on the other hand, reflects their flaws. The affair partner reflects all of their good traits.

Remember Shirley Glass's earlier example that affairs are like a vanity mirror. That personal reflection you get from that affair partner makes



you think you're a million dollars, while marriages are far more like that makeup mirror. You see all the flaws in that makeup mirror. So, why wouldn't we rather be in front of that affair partner's vanity mirror than in front of our spouse's makeup mirror?

Will: You talked about men being underinvested, anyway. There are men who are not putting 100 percent into the marriage to begin with.

Rick: Right.

Will: And so straying was easier. Is that right?

Rick: Men who have affairs often don't value their marriage or family as highly as their wives. If there are children, the majority of women may be more invested in the family than their mate. Let me add that just because a woman is invested in the kids and house doesn't necessarily make her more invested in the marriage, but if she is investing more in the family then she'll tend to place more value in it than a mate that has little or nothing to do with marriage or family. Frequently she's the one taking care of the house, taking care of the kids, doing finances. Her life is being poured into that family. If you've got a man who's pouring his life into his business, he'll tend to have an affair because he's underinvested in the marriage and won't value the marriage the way he could. One of the methods of affair prevention is to really begin to be more invested in the relationship and more invested in the marriage.

Will: If someone believes an affair is wrong, how do they justify what they've done?

Rick: There are a number of defense mechanisms used to justify affairs: rationalization, justification, blaming, playing the victim, or minimization. Another game many people play is what I call "mortal versus venial sins." We all know committing a moral sin would be really bad, but if it's just a venial (minor) sin, then it's not that serious. So we give ourselves permission to do the lesser behaviors. Just today I listened to a guy yell at his wife, "I was just using prostitutes; it's not like I was beating you." In his mind he was a good guy as long as he wasn't beating her. While visiting prostitutes might be bad, it's not as bad as beating your mate.

Will: Do couples with children have higher ranks of infidelity than couples without children,

because the kids receive the attention and focus that the spouse should?

Rick: The role parenting plays in marriage can certainly be a stressor on the relationship, but remember, marital problems are never the cause of an affair. While children can create a relational void, it's how we fill that void that's the problem. Affairs during pregnancy, or in the first year of a child's life, are common. It occurs largely because there's a disconnection that happens between a husband and a wife, from the point of conception until the child is about eighteen months old. Because a lot of the mother's energy is going into her becoming and then being a mom to this new child who needs her.

Participating in the cycle of life is one of God's greatest gifts. But the introduction of a child radically alters a marriage. The changing nature of the relationship can cause a feeling of disconnection. The more disconnected, the more vulnerable a spouse may be to someone giving them attention that's missing in the marriage.

Will: Do you think some couples parent at the expense of the marriage?

Rick: Absolutely. But it doesn't have to be that way. Marriages need to be intentional. The energy and effort necessary in raising children siphons energy from the marriage. Marriages are comprised of three subsystems: (1) the marital dyad, that's the husband and the wife; (2) the parental dyad, that's the mom and dad; and (3) the children's subsystem. With children comes a lot of work, and energy is siphoned out of that marital dyad into that parental dyad. In the beginning, children take priority, reshaping how time is spent. Much less attention is then paid to the marriage, so the marriage begins to atrophy over time.

Will: If someone's had an affair, who do they tell? What do they do?

Rick: It's important to have support when dealing with the shockwaves created by an affair. I suggest that both partners need to identify two or three trusted people with which to process their situation. I recommend that each of these confidants receive their mate's good housekeeping seal of approval. It's helpful, if the couple is going to try to work out the marriage, when they can at least know who their mate is



talking to. Hopefully it will be someone the other party can feel safe about.

They don't need to go telling anyone beyond that. Who to tell is based on a need-to-know basis during the first thirty days. The hurt spouse may be tempted, in his or her pain, to tell everyone who will listen, but this is a bad idea. Later they'll wish they had been more judicious about who they told.

Finally, identify qualified resources to help facilitate the process. Find a marriage-and-family therapist who specializes in the treatment of infidelity, or go online and take advantage of the online courses available. Affairrecovery.com is a good example of a company offering such courses. These resources should be able to guide the process of recovery for the couple and also improve the outcome.

Will: What has to happen for a couple to fully reconcile?

Rick: The unfaithful mate needs to adequately express concern over how his or her actions impacted the hurt mate. That first stage of revelation can be explosive. They need to recognize this is temporary. It's helpful if they'll just let their mate be angry. Allow them their emotions and don't try to shut them down just because they are uncomfortable with the intensity.

Will: Isn't it really hard to sit there and take it?

Rick: Absolutely. But they also need to understand that the first stage is for the mate—the hurt spouse—to understand what happened, and the person holding that information is the unfaithful spouse. The unfaithful partner must reveal the details if the hurt spouse is to complete the first step. If they are willing to be open and answer questions—to give the information—then the probability for marital success increases. Empathy is the second factor. Are they willing to understand their mate's pain and able to communicate that understanding to their mate? Are they willing to make the changes necessary to make the relationship safe, to put boundaries in place, and stop destructive behaviors in order to give their mate the necessary safety to heal?

The couple has to come to a common understanding of their history. It can take up to a

year before a couple unravels the history and meaning of an affair. The hurt spouse has to understand what happened and why, before they can feel there is a path to keep it from happening again.

The betrayed spouse has to work through the whole aspect of grieving the loss of the marriage and relationship they thought they had. That grieving process, grieving that loss, can take different amounts of time. It's individual. It depends on the persons involved. Some people grieve mad; some people grieve sad. The hurt spouse needs to understand that they will grieve it. Also, the hurt spouse has to be willing to ultimately forgive it, to let go.

Regarding forgiveness, it's terribly important that both parties understand that forgiveness is a gift you give yourself. When the hurt spouse forgives, that's for his or her benefit. That has nothing to do with the other person.

Also, just because we forgive doesn't mean that we enter back into a relationship. Relationships happen because we choose to be safe. Somehow we choose to take responsibility and make the marriage a possibility, where you sense the other person even wants that relationship with you once again.

Finally, after the affair is contained, the hurt spouse has to be willing to explore the other marital issues and take responsibility for the areas where they failed to love.

Will: Does either party have a harder job? The person who's had the affair; does he or she have more work to do, or the person who's been victimized in the affair?

Rick: The betrayed spouse generally has the more difficult task. The unfaithful mate often feels as if a thousand-pound weight has been lifted off their chest once they come clean. Certainly addressing what they've done is imperative, but beginning the journey brings a fresh newness to life for them. On the other hand, the hurt spouse probably feels as if a dump truck of manure was just dumped on them. Their reality has been shattered and they must dig themselves back out. Why in the world would they want to be with someone that's hurt them like that? A lot of work has to happen for them to get to that point.



Will: Are there warning signs? Can a spouse begin to spot signs of trouble in a marriage that might lead to an affair?

Rick: I personally believe contempt is a sign. Once you lose respect for your mate and begin to devalue them, it's only natural for the other person to be tempted to sooth their loneliness. Some research seems to indicate that women having affairs frequently had spoken with other women having affairs as a way of getting permission. If you socialize with others having affairs, then the probability of an affair increases. Family history also plays a role. A history of affairs in the family of origin increases the probability. Also culture can play a role. Growing up in a country where having an affair is acceptable is also an indicator.

Will: Do motivations for having an affair differ between men and women?

Rick: Yes, but it's only a generalization. Men can have an affair and still really love their mate. For many, their connection is more physical than emotional. Women, on the other hand, are much more integrated. When a woman has an affair, typically she has to have completely fallen out of love with her mate. Her heart has to have already disconnected before she will reconnect in another place.

Most men, if they have a pattern of withdrawing, interpret their wives aggressive pursuit for connection as nagging. Eventually if there's no meaningful engagement from her mate, she'll quit complaining and grieve the loss of her relationship. Her emotions freeze and go numb. For her it's just too painful to continue to take the risk of connecting if she always feels rejected. Who wants to want if you're not wanted in return? When the complaining stops, her heart has detached and she becomes vulnerable to someone who will relationally engage. She generally carries deep resentment toward her husband that she's been unable to resolve. Now she's vulnerable. All she needs is opportunity, because the need is certainly there. She's given up on the fact that her husband will give her love and respect.

Will: What should people learn as a result of an affair — not to excuse any of the damage or in any way to say the means justifies the end?

Rick: Affairs often serve as a chance for people to be different, to see themselves differently, to stretch and grow, and to try new things. Over the years, marriages can get stuck in a rut and a person may cut off part of who they are because of their routine. In marriages we tend to see our mate through an historical lens. We don't just see them as they are today, we still see them as they were when we first got married, but over time they matured and grew more capable. The affair partner sees them for what they've become, not what they once were. Being seen through new eyes not only facilitates their feeling better about themselves, but it tends to draw out behaviors associated with the new and improved version of themselves.

Unfortunately, if they were able to bring this new and improved version of themselves into the marriage their mate would be thrilled. But in their mind they are stuck; they can't even see how they could be this person within the marriage. Many is the time that I've treated a woman who was sexually inhibited in her marriage, who has no prior sexual experience before her marriage, but in an affair discovered aspects of her sexuality she didn't know existed. (By the way, this isn't her mate's fault; they just weren't able to learn to see themselves or their mate differently). In reality her marriage could benefit from her new found freedom if she could bring that into the marriage bed.

Will: How do you help them to do this?

Rick: After an affair, you've got to learn to ask the right questions. Most people want to do a comparative analysis between the affair partner and themselves. "Was the other person more attractive?" "What did you like about him better?" "Did she have bigger breasts?" "Did he have a bigger penis?" Those questions ultimately serve little or no benefit in helping to reconcile a relationship.

I always ask questions about the unfaithful spouse: "How were you different in the other relationship?" How did you express affection to the affair partner; how did you express affection to your mate? And, of the way that you were in that other relationship, what would you like to bring back so that you can be the person you want to be in your primary relationship? How can we foster that part of you in this relationship?



One client, when faced with those questions, stated that in the marriage he was just soccer dad driving a minivan, but in the affair he was fun Mike. He said as “soccer dad” life was dull and common place, but as fun Mike he brought joy and life to others. He was finally able to see that he was the common denominator and learned how to bring fun Mike back into his marriage. Believe it or not, his wife was ecstatic to have a new man that was full of life. It was much more enjoyable for her to be married to a fun guy than a dull guy.

Will: That’s not at all what I thought you’d say. What made you take that approach?

Rick: If someone is in an affair there is some sort of attraction, and I want to understand what it is. Romantic projection is part of it. As I mentioned before, we have a tendency to see ourselves through the eyes of another person. The affair partner’s view is typically more positive than the view of their mate, but there seems to be more.

I’ve noticed that people in affairs, or even sex addicts, tend to take on a new persona when they are away from their mate and they tend to like who they are in their other role more than they like who they are at home. They just don’t know how to be this other person in their marriage. The man or woman who was never romantic or expressive in their marriage is now expressing his or her feelings and is supportive. If they had been able to put that same amount of attention in their marriage that they did in their affair, and if they had been as expressive in their marriage, then things would have been radically different.

Will: Can those behaviors be transferred into a marriage?

Rick: That’s one of the goals. I don’t want the hurt spouse to try to emulate the affair partner, rather I want the unfaithful spouse to express, in the marriage, all the parts of himself he was able to experience in the affair.

It’s not unusual to see someone married to a strong competent woman having an affair with a weaker woman. The affair allows him to see himself as a rescuer and helps him feel needed. So they put on their super hero costume and set out to rescue the damsel in distress. This is frequently how men get into affairs with

strippers or prostitutes. They feel “this person needs me.” What’s sad about this is their mate would love to have a “knight in shining armor.” Being competent and capable doesn’t mean they don’t want to be stroked and taken care of. Usually they just don’t know how to ask for what they need or her way of asking may actually just push him away.

Will: How do you affair-proof a marriage?

Rick: As Peggy Vaughn, author of The Monogamy Myth points out, just because you’re married, don’t assume monogamy. Accept that it’s highly probable that sometime in the history of your marriage, you may experience romantic feelings for someone other than your mate. That would be normal. We don’t control the physiological feelings of desire, but this in no way means we no longer care for our mate. Yet, if those feelings remain hidden, they can fester and grow. Develop a relationship where you can expose rogue desires in order to protect the marriage. Assume that affairs can happen. That’s the first thing I teach my couples to keep them from having affairs.

Always guard the integrity of the marriage. Give permission to ask questions regarding areas of temptation, for the sake of the marriage. My wife asks questions all the time: “Is there anybody right now that you’re attracted to? Any place you’re struggling?” If I’m having a hard time, I’ll tell her I’m having a hard time. It sure makes it a lot less tempting. In fact, it even seems kind of silly a lot of times. Once I bring it out to the light and start talking about it and expose it, the temptation doesn’t seem nearly so appealing.

Another way to help stave off affairs is to grant your spouse access to email and cell phones. If intimacy is the ability to be known, then I can see no reason to hide information from your mate and hinder intimacy.

Finally, avoid making *seemingly unimportant decisions* that lead to or create high-risk situations.

Will: Give me an example.

Rick: For instance, as we mentioned previously, on a business trip, if you make the decision to eat alone with someone you find attractive, assuming nothing will ever happen, this is a seemingly



unimportant decision. Yet it is certain nothing will happen if you avoid putting yourself at risk in the first place.

Another example: for a sex addict, a seemingly unimportant decision is giving yourself permission to surf the internet, somehow thinking you won't go to a porn site. If you avoid such high-risk situations, the probability of something happening goes way down. Let me say that there's nothing wrong with business trips or the internet, but placing yourself at risk and being unaware of that risk increases the probability of infidelity happening.

Will: Is there ever a need to tell children about an affair?

Rick: The younger the children are, I think the more important it is to protect them. The last thing a child needs is having to carry the burden of their parent's mistakes. If the children have heard things and are asking questions, then you may need to be more open. Secrecy is and pretending can be even worse. . On the other hand if they don't know any thing about it then keeping them out of it may be the kindest thing you can do, even if there are adult children.

A common mistake involving children is to begin using them as confidants. Children don't have the emotional maturity necessary to handle that information and it robs them of their childhood. Spousification of a child, (sharing details and processing information as you would with a spouse) is abusive and creates deep problems for a child.

When parents separate, they need to decide together what the story is going to be and tell the children together, sitting together on the same sofa. Even though a husband and wife and eventually divorce, they will never be able to terminate their responsibility as Mom and Dad. For that reason the children need to be reassured that they will still be dealing with the children together.

When talking to children I suggest that the unfaithful person might say something like this: "I didn't love (treat) your father (mother) the way that married people should love (treat) each other." That's truthful. It's not denying the presence of a third party, but it doesn't rock their world by bringing an unknown third party into their world.

Will: Is there anything else you want to say in closing?

Rick: People need to know that there is hope. Marriages can reconcile and while that may not be a viable choice, it is certainly a path needing consideration. Initially, the pain can be so intense and the distrust so great that there may be no desire to explore this possibility, but for most, this will prove to be their greatest chance for finding the life they want. The opportunity for divorce will always exist, but opportunities for exploring the root problems and for personal growth are best found prior to pursuing a divorce. I strongly encourage you, if you're caught in the pain created by a betrayal, to give yourself a gift and work through the pain and find the answers.



About AffairRecovery.com

Affair Recovery specializes in helping people heal after infidelity. After recovering from his own affair 28 years ago and helping 2,000+ other couples do the same, founder Rick Reynolds and his team have developed research-validated, groundbreaking online and in-person programs for redeeming the losses created by infidelity, betrayal, and sexual addiction. Take the free *Affair Analyzer* online assessment or to learn more visit www.AffairRecovery.com

Glossary

Attachment - an emotional bond felt toward another person or thing

Baggage - the unhealthy emotional characteristics or thought habits that have developed as a result of unresolved wounds, particularly those that affect others with whom we are in relationships

Bilateral - two sides are involved, i.e. a two-party agreement

Crystallization - inability to see the faults of another due to limerence

Dyad - pair

Emotional Intimacy - the bond created by sharing vulnerable details about oneself with another

Empathy - the capacity to recognize and share feelings that are being experienced by another person

Limerence - a physiological reaction where someone experiences a strong, obsessive attraction to another person, also known as infatuation

Love Addiction - the compulsive, possibly sub-conscious, search for emotional satisfaction

Moral Relativism - the belief that right and wrong are not objective standards, but differ according to one's cultural, religious, philosophical, situational, or personal position

Sexual Addiction - the compulsive, possibly sub-conscious, search for sexual satisfaction

Spousification of a child - sharing details and processing information as you would with a spouse

Unilateral - one-sided. i.e. acting without agreement from other parties.