

# The bitter taste of forbidden fruit

One of the most devastating experiences that can happen to someone is to find out that a partner has had an affair.

Whether it comes as a bolt from the blue, or there are telltale signs and you uncover the truth in an almighty showdown, you are going to feel shattered.

What you thought was an unbreakable trust has been violated in the most devastating way. You feel hurt, confused and angry.

However, attraction to people other than your partner is normal for both men and women. The problem comes when this attraction is acted upon. There are three main contexts where affairs can happen.

First, if someone is uncomfortable with intimacy in an ongoing relationship, an affair can be an escape route. So rather than face the threat in the current relationship, an affair seems more attractive and intoxicating.

The second scenario is where an affair results from an unhappy or damaged relationship. A relationship can be affected by a tragedy such as the loss of a child, the loss of a job, or a major accident. The person who has an affair in this situation is fleeing from a life trauma that is just too painful.

For example, a corporate wizard who finds himself without the job that defines who he was may have an affair to avoid the pain of depression. An affair seems a much more exciting and interesting alternative to facing deep emotional pain.

The third group of people who may have an affair are those who have neglected their long-term relationship. Two people have grown apart because over the years they haven't made space for "couple time",

Far from being an indulgence, making time for being a couple, as well as a family, is an investment in maintaining a vital relationship. If this isn't done, the relationship eventually withers away, and suddenly one partner discovers an exciting possibility of a relationship away from the marriage.

An affair has so much power to hurt because it represents a betrayal of the trust on which the existing relationship was built.

It is hard to predict what will happen after an affair. Some couples recover and repair the relationship. Others call it a day.

It's important that whatever is decided, the feelings of both partners are worked through and an understanding is reached about why the affair happened. Both partners have to deal openly with their experiences and each other.

This is where a specialist counsellor can help. The job of the counsellor is to be neutral and not to judge either party. The couple must come up with their own solutions, and counselling is about facilitating that process.

It can also help people decide if they want to repair the relationship or if it is so far gone that it's irretrievable. If the couple decide to call it quits, it's important to work it through so that they don't continue to carry the baggage from this broken relationship.

Repairing the relationship doesn't mean you get back what you had before the affair. A sacred trust has been violated, so you need to work out a new future.

Whether you're a footballer, movie star, housewife or the local accountant, affairs can and do happen. The challenge is finding the right way out of the mess for both of you. There is always a way forward, but it's up to the people concerned to seek some professional help and find out what is right for them.

## Survival tips

- **Don't make decisions about your future in the heat of the moment**
- **Get some help from a professional counsellor to understand what went wrong**
- **Work through your issues to find out if you want to repair your relationship or whether you both need to move on**
- **Don't give up – there is always a way forward**