

Getting it together

Affairs: do they boost or destroy marriage?

By
BOB TRENZ,
Ph.D.



It seems like everyone is doing it—having extra-marital affairs. Presidents, neighbors, television heroines and sports heroes—all appear to be falling in love with a sexual and moral revolution that has reached far proportions.

Amorous infidelity is not a recent invention, of course. At times, though, it seems so widespread that followers of monogamy and faithfulness feel apologetic for their old, fashioned values.

In the vast array of articles and books that have examined modern sexuality, some reputed experts have even argued that extra-marital affairs can enhance marriage or be an alternative to divorce. Since it is rare that individuals find partners who can meet all their personal needs according to the advocates of affairs, marital tensions are avoided when spouses seek outside outlets.

Occasional sexual adventures have been promoted as opportunities for broadening the experience of married partners. Some also have argued that such experiences foster greater sexual confidence.

A whole new morality seems to be forming which attacks jealousy and possessiveness and promotes open sexual relationships as the only mature way to mate. Sexual exclusivity is not natural, says the new morality.

ACROSS THE battlefield the bestions of tradition are expressing dismay and disapproval for such thinking. For such moralists extra-marital affairs are unquestionably wrong, without exception or excuse.

For intelligent married men and women both of these opposing views are hard to swallow. I am aligned with neither side. I don't believe human beings should enter into sexually exclusive relationships only because it is morally proper. But, I also feel that affairs are almost always extremely harmful to marriage.

Affairs are conducted secretly. They depend therefore on deception, cunning and dishonesty. Few things can be more poisonous to a marriage relationship. The decision to seek outside intimacies is a breach of the marital contract for most. It is done unilaterally without open discussion. It breaks a promise. It destroys trust.

The success of a marriage relationship depends greatly on trust. The love bond implies we will open ourselves to each other dropping our defenses making our selves vulnerable. And we therefore promise to be careful with each other's sensitivities.

It is no wonder then that marriages often don't survive the discovery of an affair. Rebuilding trust after such a breach of faith is extremely difficult and often impossible.

EVEN WHEN undetected affairs cast away at the possibility of a successful marriage. They divert and misdirect energies and they are caused by frustration and boredom.

TO BE SUCCESSFUL marriages require frequent confrontations, open expressions of dissatisfaction. If a frustrated partner tries to satisfy his unmet intimacy needs outside of his marriage he is preventing the needed confrontation at home. His extra-marital solution to boredom actually guarantees that he will continue to be bored with his wife.

The more a person turns to affairs the more that individual destroys the possibility of a successful love relationship at home. The frequent deceptions begin to take on a game-like character. The un-

happy spouse becomes the enemy, the one person who must never find out. The secret life of the unstable partner becomes a wedge, driving the couple further and further apart. How can intimacy survive when such an important piece of a partner's life must be kept hidden?

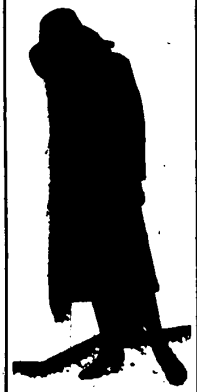
It doesn't.

More than anything, a long-term love relationship must have dedication if it is to survive. It requires that partners continue to work at it. Frustrations and boredom must be discussed and resolved.

IF EITHER partner feels he or she may pursue other outlets instead of confronting the marriage, the chances of continued dedication dwindle. To make marriage work it requires a kind of voluntary captivity. Both partners must choose to fence themselves into their primary intimate relationship. Other friendships and intimacies may be allowed, but not to the extent that they become substitutes for the love partners hope to get from their marriage.

Bob Trenz is a Rochester marriage counselor and psychologist. Questions for Dr. Trenz may be sent to the Rochester Observer & Eccentric, 110 N. Main, Rochester, 14802.

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