

# A LINE ON LIFE

10/16/94

## Myths of Marital Infidelity \*

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Many of us have heard that "*50% of marriages will end in divorce*," but do you believe it? I wouldn't. This conclusion was obtained by going over the marriage and divorce records for one year. They found that – for every 100 marriages recorded that year – there were about 50 divorces. It is logical to say that in this year, there was one divorce for every two marriages. However, this does *not* mean that half of the marriages will end in divorce. The divorces were from a much larger group of marriages that were performed over many previous years. To accurately test our beginning statement, researchers would have to follow marriages from a specific year over a long span of time. So far, nobody has done this. There are also myths about marital infidelity. Here are seven of these myths.

- **Everybody has affairs.** Repeated studies from 1981-1990 indicate that about 50% of married men and about 25% of married women have affairs, usually only one. When affairs occur, they are more likely to be in the last years of an already dying marriage. Almost all Americans strongly hold the standard of marital fidelity, but everyone doesn't live up to their standards.
- **Affairs are good for a marriage.** Some people wrongly think that a dull marriage can be livened up with an affair. In reality, any affair is more likely to damage or destroy a marriage. If the couple want to "*liven up*" their relationship, it is more effective to adjust their relationship – in contrast to seeking outside diversions.
- **Affairs prove that love has vanished from the marriage.** In any relationship, the feelings between partners are very complex. We can "*love*" more than one person at the same time. Just because someone has an affair does not necessarily mean that the adulterous person no longer loves the spouse.
- **The lover is sexier than the spouse.** Because the affair – by definition – involves sex, the lover is more likely to be viewed as a "*stud*" or "*nympho*." Although this is sometimes true, sex is often better with the spouse than the new lover. Even though there is some sex – rather than being superior to the spouse, the lover's appeal is more likely based on being *different* from the spouse. In extramarital relationships – rather than seeking someone to replace their marriage partner – spouses are more likely to be searching for something to supplement the partner, to provide something they think is missing from their marriage.
- **The affair is the fault of the person betrayed.** The careless charge of "*You drove me to it!*" is often accepted as true by both partners. However, when a

spouse is dissatisfied with a marriage, there are many options available besides having an affair. This charge is part of the defense mechanism of **projection** – blaming another for your own failings, finding your negative qualities in somebody else while denying them in yourself. It is easier to blame someone else than to accept the responsibility for your own decisions. Although you can drive someone away from you, you cannot "drive" him or her into having an affair.

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## ***"Extramarital affairs thrive on secrecy."***

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- **If you ignore a spouse's affair, it will eventually stop.** Affairs typically evolve from some basic problems in the relationship. Until the affair is recognized, the more basic problems that underlie it cannot be remedied. **Secrecy** allows affairs to thrive. Most of us are bound closer by a shared secret, while we are uncomfortable about lying to another. Thus the secret binds the lovers closer together, and the lies – or ignoring the issues – drives the spouses further apart. In fact, a basic weakness in any marriage can be the tendency to avoid issues. If you don't deal with the problems at hand, how can you ever remedy them?
- **After an affair, divorce is inevitable.** Dealing with an affair is a crisis in any marriage. Although the offended spouse might be extremely hurt and angry, the marriage is not automatically doomed. Some do get divorced. Others feel obliged to stay together in loveless and unhappy marriages. Once trust has been violated, it is very hard – if not impossible – to regain. However, with a great deal of effort, some couples can use this crisis to improve their marriage. In each case, the marital partners have to decide whether their relationship is worth saving. If so, it takes a great deal of open and honest communication to resolve the deeper marital problems that preceded the affair. It might be necessary to seek counseling or therapy, so this goal can be reached.

• Unlike fairy tales, married couples do not walk off into the sunset and "*live happily ever after*." As in any interpersonal relationship, there will be conflicts. If the partners can communicate openly to deal constructively with these conflicts while they are still small, they are easier to handle. If you avoid them they can grow into ugly monsters that are almost impossible to manage. Although coping with any conflict is uncomfortable, wouldn't you rather have the smaller discomfort?

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\* Adapted from Jeffrey Turner and Larna Robinson's *Contemporary Human Sexuality*, Prentice Hall, 1993. Pages 457-458.