

Avoiding Dangerous Liaisons

Years ago, folk artist Joni Mitchell wrote a song called “Big Yellow Taxi”. The lyrics had a refrain that went, “don’t it always seem to go that you don’t know what you’ve got till it’s gone”. Betrayal in relationship can be summarized in this way. No matter what the betrayal is, something is irretrievably lost. Sometimes it’s trust, sometimes it’s innocence but whatever it is, the relationship will never regain it.

Shirley Glass, Ph.D., one of the foremost experts on infidelity, states that she is now seeing a new kind of threat to marriage, in “friendships, work relationships and Internet liaisons”. It is not coming from partners living in bad relationships or intentionally seeking excitement elsewhere but from “well-intentioned” people who “unwittingly form deep, passionate connections before realizing they’ve crossed the line”. Dr. Glass defines an affair as not only sexual, but also emotional: “sometimes the greatest betrayals happen without touching”. There are many myths regarding infidelity that get perpetuated even by seasoned clinicians. Therefore it is difficult to pinpoint an exact cause but what is known is that it takes years for couples to heal.

The revelation of an affair for the betrayed partner is a trauma. It comes with all the symptoms that one would have during any traumatic event: shock, disbelief, trouble eating and sleeping, hypervigilance, depression, possibly even PTSD. Everything becomes suspect about the other person and their actions. It is ironic that the betrayer can actually become a force for healing in this when he or she allows transparency to the other; in other words, when questions are answered completely and honestly and actions are open to observation. Dr. Glass finds that it *is* possible to emerge from betrayal with a stronger marriage but most need time and help from a clinician who understands what is involved. As an example, therapists who minimize a partner’s need to know the details or the overall distress experienced (even after some time has elapsed) may not be helpful. In addition, most couples need to allocate a sufficient time in therapy, greater than ten sessions at a minimum.

It’s a lot easier to practice caution and awareness given the potential risks of affairs in marriage than to be engaged in a long process of recovery. One of the major preventative tools we have is developing and setting appropriate boundaries in relationships. Marital counselors Drs. Henry Cloud and John Townsend in their book, Boundaries in Marriage, discuss the need for “boundaries between the marriage and the outside world” in order to protect love as “the core of marriage”. It is important to recognize

“intruders” that can weaken the marital bond and come in the form of work, kids, outside hobbies and interests, TV, in-laws, internet, friends, addictions, etc. Continuing to recognize and protect the “best friendship” that is marriage can mean curtailing certain relationships or activities that may have existed when we were single. When it comes to friendships, we need to ask ourselves some important questions such as, “do I find myself confiding more to my friend than to my spouse, even about intimate details of my marriage?” or “is this only a platonic relationship?” When it comes to activities, are these shared between my partner and I or do I spend more time with others, at the expense of relationship-building? Finally, are there aspects that I keep from my spouse either about a friendship or activity that I would be uncomfortable sharing? A “yes” answer to any of these questions can be a sign of trouble.

Dr. Glass calls emotional intimacy “the most powerful bond of all”. It should be reserved primarily for marriage partners. However, what happens in longer-term relationships is that flaws begin to emerge and get mirrored back in our partner’s eyes. We are “seen” as more of the flawed person that we actually are. In emotional affairs, there is an intense positive mirroring that occurs along with an opportunity to experience new roles and opportunities to get needs met. We are adored in the eyes of the other without all the baggage coming from years of relating and conflict. Proofing our relationships against infidelity requires a recognition of the power of long-term, committed love and relational history against the temporary and often blind allure of infatuation or lust.

Attraction to others is normal. But just as we have behavioral codes in society for minimizing danger to self and others, so should certain codes become operational in marriage. A realistic appraisal of emotional “danger” and avoidance of risky situations plus setting and keeping boundaries in our primary relationships will keep us safe from dangerous liaisons. And just as more and more research is emerging on the importance of social networks in influencing individual behavior, we need to surround ourselves with friends who are happily married and don’t believe in fooling around.

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