

The New Face of Infidelity

What lures Christians to cheat?
Corrie Cutrer

If you're among the many couples who feel like you're barely hanging on in marriage, the sobering truth is that you're not alone. Particularly if cheating is involved.

At least 60 percent of married couples will experience infidelity at some point in their marriage, says [Dr. Willard F. Harley Jr.](#), a licensed psychologist in Minnesota and author of the best-selling book *His Needs, Her Needs: Building an Affair-Proof Marriage*.

All kinds of reasons exist for this, many of which sound textbook in their familiarity—couples experience periods of sustained stress, exhaustion, or separation due to family needs or career obligations. Husbands and wives don't feel satisfied with each other or deeply connected. People endure longstanding dullness or even deadness in their relationships. Men and women wrestle with boredom, loneliness or unmet needs. Life feels tedious and hard, and a titillating experience beckons.

A Kinder Way of Cheating?

Unfortunately, knowing in theory all the right answers when it comes to why people cheat hasn't stopped unfaithfulness from occurring. As the wake from the Ashley Madison scandal has shown us, the culture at large is confused when it comes to how we approach infidelity. Websites such as OpenMinded.com have introduced the concept of ethical cheating, asking us to consider a kinder way of infidelity where couples can engage in "open relationships" that involve telling a spouse you are going to be unfaithful or including the spouse in new, outside-the-marriage relationships. Additionally, a recent *Time* magazine article posed the question, "Is monogamy over?" to a group of newsmakers, all who gave varying views (including a plea for legalized polygamy).

In a large online survey, 68 percent of women said they'd have an affair if they thought they could avoid getting caught, says [Dave Carder](#), a licensed marriage and family therapist in California and author of [Close Calls: What Adulterers Want You to Know About Protecting Your Marriage](#). Increasingly, it seems like personal integrity is taking a backseat to fear of exposure.

Sexless Marriage?

Within Christian circles, where strict monogamy is publicly lauded, our private sexual ethics have nonetheless become clouded. Consider the porn factor. Millennials have grown up in a culture where the average age for children to be first exposed to pornography has crept younger and younger (today it's at age 11). By high school, 90 percent of boys are regularly viewing porn, says [Laura Gallier](#), author of several books for children and teens on sexuality. Additionally, an internal poll among Rice University students revealed one in five females says she is addicted to pornography, Gallier says.

"For married couples where one or both people bring into the relationship a past experience with porn, sex often becomes something other than a beautiful thing," says Cheryl Scruggs, co-founder with her husband, Jeff, of [Hope Matters Marriage Ministries](#) in Texas.

Ironically, Scruggs and her husband work with many young couples in their twenties who are in crisis at large partly because of sexless marriages. A struggle with porn kept the couple from having sex, only to either lead to estrangement within the marriage or to one person looking outside the marriage for sexual fulfillment in the arms of someone else or toward the continued use of porn.

The Changing Face of Infidelity

The coming of age of Millennials, in fact, has introduced a new wave of cultural realities that have impacted the causes of infidelity throughout the past 15 to 20 years.

Take, for instance, the fact that young women married seven years or less are one of the fastest growing demographic groups committing adultery. These are women who either didn't grow up with a dad in the home or never had a healthy relationship with their father or stepfather. "They've never had a male mentor," says Carder. "So there is a huge hole in most of these women's hearts. A man comes along—many times an older man—and begins listening to them, and they just cave."

Among both Millennials and Gen Xers, Carder points out, another reality is that 50 percent of this married demographic are children of divorce. "They haven't seen a model or a practice of healthy, lasting marriages set before them," Carder says. "If it gets bad, you cut and run." They also carry with them attachment injuries from a mom or dad who abandoned them or broke up the family. Carder notes that these injuries demonstrate themselves in a marriage in three ways—the spouse either becomes too clingy, too cautious (afraid to get too close because they might get hurt), or too chaotic (too restless to be tied down or commit long-term).

Within Christian communities, it's also striking to note that relationships among young marrieds are particularly fragile during the early years of starting a family. (Fifty percent of all first-time affairs by husbands occur while the wife is pregnant or during the first year after delivery, Carder notes.)

Millennials, who are entering marriage in their late twenties or early thirties, are also now doing so with much more extensive sexual histories (an average of five or six past partners). This places weighty expectations of sexual satisfaction on their married partner that the relationship cannot often sustain.

"Many of these past sexual experiences were physical infatuations," Carder says. "And when you're infatuated, it's like sex on cocaine. Marital sex never compares over time with that. Never."

Instead of learning to stoke the fires of healthy sexual tension (flirting, teasing, and enjoying the slow build-up that leads to fulfilling sex), these couples are coming into marriage with a past mindset that said: *Sex is about hopping into bed as soon as possible. This might never happen again, so I better take advantage of it right now.* So sex within marriage quickly becomes a chore.

Social media has also flung open the door wide to the ease in which people can engage in emotional affairs. Old infatuations can be instantly triggered through connecting with past boyfriends or girlfriends. "Those former experiences and feelings are still stored in the brain," Carder says. "A man might see a woman on Facebook that he liked in college. It doesn't matter if she's put on 80 pounds. It's the memory she generates. He desires connection with her."

An Unexpected Instinct

It was Scruggs' own difficult journey through infidelity that led her and her husband to create a ministry focused on helping other couples find healing and hope for their broken marriages.

Scruggs, now 57, says the life she led with her husband after they first married in their mid-twenties seemed picturesque. Living in Los Angeles at the time, they both had great jobs, a beautiful home, and money for anything they desired. Yet she felt empty. "I didn't really feel like I knew my husband," she recalls. "I didn't feel like I knew his heart. I was lonely and dying inside."

She thought having children might be the answer, and after fertility treatments the couple had twin girls. "I was okay for a little while; then that gnawing hole in my heart returned," she says.

When the twins were 16 months old, Scruggs traveled for work to a national sales meeting, where she connected with a male colleague whom she'd known for a long time professionally. "I wasn't looking to get out of my marriage at all," she says. "I wasn't looking to cheat. I just wasn't that kind of person."

Scruggs and her colleague talked late into the night and he asked her to breakfast the next morning before the meeting concluded. "Of course I replied no," she says. "But somehow I found myself at the table with him the following morning. I felt really connected to him. I flew home on a Friday and found myself thinking over the weekend, *I can't wait to get back to the office on Monday to talk on the phone to this guy.*"

They began communicating regularly over the phone. A month later, the two met at a hotel and slept together.

While Scruggs' actions were shocking to herself, they fit a pattern of what often unfolds during an adulterous affair. "The vast majority of affairs—I'd say 95 percent—occur without planning or intent," Harley says. "Affairs usually start with a friendship. You find yourself attracted to another person, not necessarily sexually. You just like the person. You get along really well. Then one thing leads to another and eventually you develop an attraction and the affair becomes sexual."

Harley frequently counsels couples facing infidelity, and the injured spouse is always bewildered by how his or her partner could have entered into a sexual relationship with someone else. Harley's answer is always the same: "Because we're wired for it," he says. "We have an instinct to sexually connect. And our instincts will lead us into a whole lot of trouble if we don't take extraordinary precautions."

The precautionary measure Harley most strongly emphasizes is that married individuals should not have close personal relationships with people of the opposite sex. "This person shouldn't become your buddy or someone who's going to be there for you when you need a sympathetic ear or help with a favor," he says.

Quite often, it's those kind of friendships that can quickly blossom into emotional affairs, Carder adds. "Men and women are working together, serving together, going to the gym together, and practicing hobbies and interests together more than ever before," he says. "With these kind of relationships, I often see people move from what I describe as 'external professional' to an 'internal personal' relationship. And when you step over that threshold, you're entering into risky business."

For someone who's wondering if they've entered into an emotional affair, Carder offers these introspective questions: Has this become a mood-altering experience for you? Does seeing this person or receiving a text or tweet from them improve your mood? Are you dressing in ways to get noticed? Are you engaging in personal conversations? Are you also trying to hide or deny those communications, knowing that if someone realized how much the relationship was having an effect on you, you'd be in trouble?

Harley says he's received plenty of flak from others who say his strong stance against opposite-sex friendships is a ridiculously strict idea. "My response is this: If you were to have an affair, it would be the most devastating experience in your spouse's life," he says. "It rises to the level of losing a child, of having your house burn down, or of losing a limb. It's that bad. So for something that devastating, extraordinary precautions are reasonable."

In the wake of Scruggs' infidelity, this kind of devastation hit her family head on. She divorced her husband without ever telling him the true reason she was leaving. He begged her not to do it, but she was bent on pursuing a new life with another man.

In hindsight, Scruggs says she felt as if she became two different people. "I never considered myself capable of having an affair. I kept thinking, *What in the world am I doing? This isn't me!* Yet I just kept going down that path. I was so deceived. I thought this guy was my soulmate and the answer to all my problems."

Scruggs went so far as to begin looking at engagement rings with the other man. But the first time she arranged a get-together with him and her daughters, something didn't feel right. She had started attending church, and three months after her divorce was finalized, she had a radical encounter with Christ and became a Christian. She'd grown up in church but realized she never entered into a personal relationship with God.

The Aftermath

The scales soon fell off her eyes and she realized what she'd done to her marriage and her family. "I thought there would be relief on the other side of divorce, but it was a disaster," she says.

Harley says this kind of realization is common at some point after an affair occurs. "It's a catastrophe for the whole family," he says.

This in part plays a role in why 95 to 98 percent of affairs do not last, Harley asserts. "They die a natural death, understandably, because it's something that's been done in secret and it's done great harm to your spouse and children," Harley says. "People end up feeling guilty and that generally has a negative effect on the affair itself." (He notes that for the 5 percent of affairs that do end up leading to marriage, only 30 percent of those relationships survive for five years.)

In the aftermath of their divorce, Scruggs' former husband, Jeff, remained deeply wounded by his wife's unfaithfulness. He was doubtful and guarded when Scruggs' first approached him with a letter she read aloud, confessing her story and asking him for forgiveness. They began to try to live amicably while co-parenting their daughters. Scruggs said she prayed for several years without ever knowing if reconciliation would be possible. Slowly, it began to happen as their hearts were turned toward one another again. Seven years after divorcing, they remarried.

"The difference between our first and second marriage was an understanding that a deep, personal, intimate relationship with Christ must come first," Scruggs says. "That led to greater intimacy between the two of us. Before we just talked about surface things and we didn't go deep into each other's hearts. But we learned what it meant to nurture our relationship through vulnerability with each other, flaws and all."

The idea that cheating offers escape, relief, and lasting pleasure is heaping loads of turmoil on marriages today. At the end of the road, the truth to be discovered about infidelity is the same of all paths that lead us away from the light. In darkness we lose ourselves. Deceit overwhelms. We forget who we are and to whom we belong: Christ our beloved. If we'll listen, he will gently remind us that there is a thief who comes to steal, kill, and destroy marriages. But he comes that we may [have life](#) and have it abundantly.

[Corrie Cutrer](#) is a writer who lives in Tennessee with her family. She's also a former assistant editor of *Today's Christian Woman* and recipient of several EPA writing awards. She is currently a regular contributor for *Today's Christian Woman*.