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# The discovery of extramarital affairs : clients in crisis and implications for counseling

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# The discovery of extramarital affairs : clients in crisis and implications for counseling

## **Abstract**

Extramarital affairs are one of the most common issues presented to counselors and other professionals in clinical settings. This issue has also been said to be one of the most difficult to treat among clinicians. In this paper, a review of the literature is presented regarding the nature of extramarital affairs and different types of affairs. Following this brief literature review, interventions are discussed for professionals when working with this population. Crisis intervention is specifically addressed in addition to practical, clinical interventions that may be used following resolution of crises.

THE DISCOVERY OF EXTRAMARITAL AFFAIRS: CLIENTS IN CRISIS  
AND IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELING

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## Abstract

Extramarital affairs are one of the most common issues presented to counselors and other professionals in clinical settings. This issue has also been said to be one of the most difficult to treat among clinicians. In this paper, a review of the literature is presented regarding the nature of extramarital affairs and different types of affairs. Following this brief literature review, interventions are discussed for professionals when working with this population. Crisis intervention is specifically addressed in addition to practical, clinical interventions that may be used following resolution of crises.

## The Discovery of Extramarital Affairs: Clients in Crisis and Implications for Counseling

Counselors are faced with numerous situations on a daily basis with which they are forced to use crisis intervention skills. Crisis intervention is not only an immediate need when working with individuals but is also extremely important when working with families. One of the most common and the most devastating situations with which families may become involved is the extramarital affair (Pittman, 1987). Thompson (as cited in Weeks & Treat, 2001) states this type of crisis generally occurs for marital couples and families when one partner or another family member becomes aware that an individual in the family is involved in an extramarital affair. As a result of this crisis, marital partners may separate, which puts an enormous strain on the family unit. Holmes and Rahe's Social Readjustment Scale (as cited in Counts & Sacks, 1985) identifies marital separation as the third most stressful life event.

Although the prevalence of extramarital affairs is difficult to determine, an estimated 50-66% of men and 45-55% of women who are married take part in extramarital sex during the course of their marriage in the United States (Atwood & Seifer, 1997). A study conducted by Janus and Janus (as cited in Gordon & Baucom, 1999), found that 40% of divorced women and 44% of divorced men reported they had sexual contact with more than one person throughout their marriages.

Whisman, Dixon, and Johnson (1997) reported that counselors believe extramarital affairs to be the second most devastating problem facing couples today. In addition, these researchers also reported that counselors feel the extramarital affair is the third most challenging problem to treat (Whisman et al., 1997). The consequences of extramarital affairs are difficult to treat, therapists are seeing many clients who present with this type of a crisis. Since many therapists are seeing clients who present with this type of a crisis, it is significant for clinicians to understand and be familiar with appropriate counseling techniques to utilize with this concern. This paper will discuss the nature of affairs, various types of extramarital affairs, and practical interventions for counseling professionals when faced with the crisis and aftermath of an extramarital affair.

### The Nature of Affairs and Various Types

How do extramarital affairs come about? Why do men and women engage in extramarital affairs? There are a wide range of reasons why married women and men engage in extramarital affairs. For example, in a study conducted by Prins, Buunk, and Van Yperen (1993), results indicated that women who felt their husband had more equity in their current marital relationship were more likely than their husbands to seek out and participate in an extramarital affair. Another study, conducted by Glass and Wright (1992), found that men and women discriminate between specific justifications for extramarital involvement.

Dissatisfaction with the relationship was the number one reason given by males and females for choosing to participate in an affair (Roscoe, Cavanaugh, & Kennedy, 1988). In a study conducted by Hurlbert (1992) it was found that the more a woman viewed sex positively instead of negatively, the longer she continued the extramarital affair. Other factors that may contribute to the reasons men and women participate in affairs may include the inability to find meaning in the marital relationship and inability to satisfy various roles in the family (Chadwick, Albrecht, & Kunz, 1976). The nature of extramarital affairs and how they may originate must be understood by professionals in order to effectively treat the relationships that are strongly affected by these situations. Counselors and other professionals must also be aware that there are varying levels of intensity and numerous types of extramarital affairs that occur.

#### Nature of Extramarital Affairs

The reasons why people participate in affairs are varied and some appear to be extremely complex. Some individuals in today's society assume that affairs are caused by negative energy coming from within one's marriage (Pittman, 1987). Pittman (1987) states that it is unwise for counselors and therapists to assume the cause of an affair comes from forces within the marriage. This may limit their ability to deal effectively with these situations in a clinical setting.

Rhodes (1984) identifies three reasons why married individuals engage in affairs. One reason an individual may participate in an affair is that the affair may



serve as an important function for the marriage to continue. The affair may regulate distance between the couple, which may assist in continuing the marital relationship. Since both partners have time away from each other, their time together may be more satisfying. In these cases, the partner who is not having an affair may have no idea that their partner is taking part in an affair. Therefore, the 'unknowing' partner is most likely to be extremely devastated when finding about an extramarital affair in which their partner has engaged. According to Rhodes (1984), another reason individuals engage in affairs is to bring about a reason for the couple or family to go through marital therapy. Some individuals may not express or may be hesitant to express their desire to engage in marital therapy due to problems within the marriage. Therefore, they may seek out an affair that may ultimately "force" the married couple in to therapy due to the other partner's suspicions or 'finding out' of the affair. A third concept Rhodes (1984) discusses regarding the nature of extramarital affairs is harmless flirtation. An individual may engage in what he or she feels is harmless flirtation with someone outside of the marriage. This 'harmless flirtation' may eventually lead to an extramarital affair.

Other reasons or justifications for why many individuals choose to take part in extramarital affairs that are cited in the literature include dissatisfaction with the marital relationship (Bell, Turner, & Rosen, 1975; Ellis, 1969; Hunt, 1974; Atwood & Seifer, 1997; Banfield, 2001; Humphrey, 1982), a desire for

variety and/or experimentation (Ellis, 1969; Johnson, 1972; Neubeck, 1969; Atwood & Seifer, 1997; Glass & Wright, 1992; Humphrey, 1982), to get revenge (Roscoe, Cavanaugh, & Kennedy, 1988; Greene, Lee, & Lustig, 1974; Johnson, 1972; Spanier & Margolis, 1983; Atwood & Seifer, 1997; Glass & Wright, 1992), ego bolstering (Roscoe et al., 1988; Ellis, 1969; Johnson, 1972). Additional motives for seeking out affairs that have been cited in the literature include to gain emotional satisfaction (Bell et al., 1975; Neubeck, 1969) and sexual incompatibility with marital partner (Buunk, 1980; Tavis & Sadd, 1975). Beliefs that affairs are good for marriage, that an affair can revive a dull marriage and affairs are a 'normal' part of marriage are also reasons that have been identified for participating in extramarital affairs. Atwood and Seifer (1997) identified the lover is "sexier" or "better looking" than the marital partner, wanting to adopt an alternative lifestyle, a need to be accepted, to rekindle a former romance, curiosity, rebellion, love, friendship, infrequent marital sex, spousal permission, pleasure and recreation, "helping out" a sexually deprived friend, compensation for feeling inferior or inadequate, drunk or under influence of drugs, to gain social status, to clarify sexual orientation, to create jealousy, to "cure" sexual dysfunction, to earn money, and to get attention as stated reasons why men and women for engage in affairs. Fun, for a romantic experience, to feel young, to relieve sexual deprivation of frustration, for companionship, for sexual

excitement, to get love and affection, falling in love, to advance in a career are other justifications (Glass & Wright, 1992).

### Types of Extramarital Affairs

Levine (1998) describes four types of relationships individuals may engage in through an extramarital affair. The first type Levine (1998) labels is an *affair*. The term *affair* implies that there is a personal and emotional attachment between the two lovers. The emotional and psychological involvement usually occurs prior to the sexual relationship in this type of affair. The second type of affair discussed by Levine (1998) is *just-sex*. These types of affairs carry no obligations. *Just-sex* encounters include having sex with a person or persons on only one occasion, involvement with prostitutes, and other arrangements made between two or more people who are involved. *Making-do sex* is the third type of affair Levine (1998) addresses. This can also be described as casual or convenient sex. Individuals involved in this type of extramarital affair may just be staying in the marriage until they find a different partner who seems to be a better choice than their current spouse or until something better comes along. *Imaginary partner sex* is the final type of affair discussed by Levine (1998). This type of affair includes such activities as keeping explicit photos, videotapes, and attending strip shows without the person actually engaging in sexual intercourse with another human being.

Additional researchers have also classified extramarital affairs into various categories and forms. For example, Atwood and Seifer (1997) list three forms of extramarital relationships: (1) sexual encounters involving no emotional attachment, (2) sexual and emotional attachments and encounters, and (3) emotional attachments not involving a sexual relationship.

Brown (1991) also categorizes patterns of infidelity. Her first category is *conflict avoidant affairs*, where the individual wants to be discovered. The second type of affair Brown identifies is *intimacy avoidant affairs*, where the individual has an affair in order to ultimately avoid being hurt by their spouse. The third type of affair is *sexual addictions*, where the individual fills his or her emptiness by engaging in sexual behaviors. *Empty nest affairs*, which are used as a supplement to an empty marriage; and *out the door affairs*, which are ways of seeing if there is someone out there who is "better" than the individual's current marital partner are the final two categories of infidelity described by Brown (1991).

Although the nature of extramarital affairs is extremely complex, it is important for professional counselors, therapists, and additional professionals to be aware of possible reasons various types of affairs originate. The nature and type of situations involving extramarital affairs differs from one individual to the next. Because the nature of each situation is different, practitioners should assess each situation openly in order to be willing to address various aspects of these

affairs. Understanding the nature of such affairs and the various types of extramarital affairs will assist counselors and therapists when treating individuals involved in these situations.

### Interventions

The discovery of an extramarital affair often precipitates a therapeutic crisis (Rhodes, 1984). When families or couples present to therapists requesting help in resolving the crisis of the discovery of an extramarital affair, a number of interventions and techniques are available. Although the available research on clinical interventions with families in crisis suggests a general outline of how therapists should approach these situations, crises of extramarital affairs are extremely complex and require skillful therapeutic management (Rhodes, 1984). Crisis intervention techniques and specific clinical and therapeutic interventions will be discussed here.

#### Crisis Intervention With the Extramarital Affair

According to Gordon and Baucom (1999) the first thing a therapist must do is to assess the extent of the crisis and the intensity of it. The therapist must also decide whether the immediate resolution of the crisis is crucial to the immediate therapy session or if it is more important to the clients' general level of functioning (Gordon & Baucom, 1999). Some situations or factors that may need consideration in the crisis of the discovery of an extramarital affair include suicide attempts and anxiety attacks (Pittman, 1987).

Pittman (1987) suggests that treating families in crisis consists of seven steps, which often overlap: emergency response, family focus, definition of the problem, general prescription, specific prescription, negotiating resistance, and termination. Emergency response is the manner in which the counselor attends to the immediate crisis. According to Pittman (1987) a therapist has the most power to prevent damage and promote change if he or she enters the situation while the crisis is fairly new. In this stage, there should be an acknowledgment of willingness to help by the therapist without 'taking over' (Pittman, 1987). The next six steps may involve a number of interventions. Deciding who should be included in therapy is one intervention that clinicians may want to utilize. This involves deciding if the clinician wants to see the couple together, separately, or both, if the couple should be seen individually by different therapists, and if additional family member will need to be included in sessions. Additional interventions clinicians may utilize include but are not limited to increasing the sense of family, disputing irrational thoughts, calming the members, generating courses of action, and eventually termination of the therapeutic relationship.

### General Clinical Interventions

After the immediate crisis of the discovery of an extramarital affair has been temporarily resolved or toned down, therapy on a more stable level may begin. The course of treatment may differ from one therapist to the next and the theoretical orientation of each therapist may be an indication of how treatment

may progress. The literature displays a wide variety of suggestions for interventions to use when treating a couple or family who is dealing with these issues and the consequences following resolution of the immediate crisis.

One of the first techniques that should be used in therapy with the case of an extramarital affair is to decide who will participate in therapy. Each therapist or counselor may have their own preference as to which family members should be involved in counseling sessions. Jung (2000) suggests that the couple participate in conjoint marital therapy along with simultaneous individual therapy for each person. Counts and Sacks (1985) suggest that the therapist work with the entire family. These researchers also state that the therapist should encourage couples to take things slowly, one step at a time, in addition to first evaluating the vulnerabilities of each family member (Counts & Sacks, 1985).

The therapist or counselor must also perform an assessment of many of the important factors involved in the extramarital affair. Weeks and Treat (2001) make a number of suggestions for areas that must first be assessed in therapy when working with the circumstances of an extramarital affair. One of these suggestions is to assess the frequency of number of different affairs or contact with one specific affair. Another area of assessment should be the number of past and present sexual partners of each person. Other things that should be discovered include the gender of the affair partner, the level of sexual activity involved, if the affair was facilitated by one or both of the affair partners, the

degree of emotional involvement with the affair partner, each partner's relationship to the affair partner, the degree of secrecy, lies, and deception that has occurred, the degree of approval given to the affair by the betrayed partner, and the degree of tolerance for extramarital affairs in the couple's social group, community, culture, and religion (Weeks & Treat, 2001).

Another intervention the literature suggests is to directly deal with the status of the affair. The context of this confrontation may depend on whether the other partner or the rest of the family is aware that the affair has occurred. Although other family members may not yet be aware of the affair, couples do present for marital counseling for additional problems. Throughout the course of therapy, counselors may discover that one or both partners are participating in an affair, without the other's knowledge

A fourth intervention is to use specific techniques when working specifically with the unfaithful partner in individual sessions and marital therapy sessions. If the other partner does not yet know about the affair, the following interventions may be done in individual therapy with the unfaithful partner. Also, prior to confrontation of the affair, the guidelines for confidentiality must be set up when one or both partners are participating in individual and marital therapy (Weeks & Treat, 2001). Kaslow (1993) suggests that the therapist should allow the unloyal spouse to keep the affair a secret until he or she is ready to tell their spouse. Kaslow (1993) believes that the agony of keeping this erroneous act a



secret will eventually exceed the shame of revealing it to their spouse. In contrast, Weeks and Treat (2001) propose that the counselor or therapist should immediately confront the affair and not ignore it. The therapist should furthermore deal with the feelings generated within the unfaithful partner by having the affair. During the course of confrontation with the unfaithful partner, it needs to be conveyed to them that the affair must stop (Weeks & Treat, 2001). Jung (2000) also proposes that the unfaithful partner put the affair on hold while his or her participation in therapy is maintained. Kaslow (1993) suggests that the therapist or counselor encourage the unfaithful partner to accept full responsibility for their choice to have the affair. Without the unfaithful partner taking full responsibility for the affair, progress in therapy may be delayed. It is also suggested that the unfaithful partner must take responsibility for their part in destroying trust in the marital relationship and in family relationships (Weeks & Treat, 2001). Also suggested is that the therapist work with the unfaithful partner by having them acknowledge and validate the betrayed partner's feelings (Weeks & Treat, 2001).

There are also several suggested interventions for professionals when working with the betrayed partner. Almost always the betrayed partner feels incredible sadness when finding out their partner has deceived them by not only having an affair, but also by hiding it. In a study conducted by Schneider, Irons, and Corley (1999), the disclosure of a secret affair to the betrayed partner resulted

in feelings of pain and hurt. Levine (1998) suggests that the counselor attentively listen to the betrayed partner and show immense interest and appreciation of their pain and uncertainty he or she is experiencing. Weeks and Treat (2001) propose that therapists also give the betrayed partner an opportunity to discuss and voice their feelings to the unfaithful partner in the therapy session. In a study conducted by Charny and Parnass (1995) it was found that a majority of betrayed partners suffered significant damage to their self-esteem, personal confidence, feelings of abandonment, betrayals of trust, and felt justified in leaving their spouses.

Therefore, when working with the betrayed partner in therapy, it is extremely important for the counselor to assist the betrayed spouse in letting go of the outrage and criticism they are most likely holding inside of them. One of the goals when working with the betrayed partner is to help them arrive at a point of forgiveness so that they can go on with their life regardless if they are still engaging in a marital relationship with the unfaithful partner or not (Kaslow, 1993).

Another series of interventions suggested for use with clients when couples or families present with the discovery of one or both parents participating in an extramarital affair is focusing on many aspects of each partner's feelings such as how they each feel about the affair or affairs, about their role in the affair, how they feel toward their marriage, and about each other individually. Weeks and Treat (2001) state that in many situations, the betrayed partner will want to

discuss the facts around the affair. These researchers suggest that the counselor should have the couple talk about their feelings and try to avoid the detailed facts regarding the affair. Often times, when an extramarital affair has occurred, both partners may attempt to rationalize the affair in their own terms. These rationalizations may be different for each partner and for each additional family member. Kaslow (1993) states that therapists should dispute all of these rationalizations so they are able to assist the client in seeing the reality of the situation. Therapists also need to understand and know that grief is almost always masked by other more obvious emotions. Attention should be paid to these emotions and counselors need to help clients express them appropriately (Levine, 1998). Other emotions that clients may need help expressing include guilt, shame, humiliation, and anger (Kaslow, 1993). If the couple has decided to stay together and participate in marital therapy, therapists and counselors need to discuss a way of making sense of the affair, what the affair meant to each partner, and what they can learn and grow from it to prevent it again (Weeks & Treat, 2001). Reframing is another technique that may be used. This involves helping the couple look at what has occurred from other view points which may, in turn, allow them to find meaning in the affair (Weeks & Treat, 2001). A final suggestion is for the couple to set aside time at home in order to express their feelings when needed so that they are not constantly talking about the same thing

and therefore, having it greatly interfere with concentration in other daily ordinary tasks (Weeks & Treat, 2001).

### Conclusion

Family and couple crises involving the discovery of an extramarital affair are extremely complex and intricate situations. Every family is comprised of individual diverse abilities to deal with stressful situations. A number of factors contribute to the amount of stress and crisis experienced by each family or couple. A great amount of research has been done on the nature of extramarital affairs. Many of these studies investigate the reasons why individuals participate in extramarital affairs and the various classifications of affairs. Although there are numerous types of affairs and reasons why individuals participate, every situation is unique. Because every situation is different, every family will deal with this differently. Families are unique in their composition and the coping mechanisms that each individual utilizes in times of crisis. Therefore, therapists and counselors must remember that every individual is different and the circumstances surrounding each case are unique. When working with families and couples in the clinical setting, counselors and therapists must have the skills necessary to deal with crisis situations and subsequent therapy with individual family members, couples, and the family unit. Research also has investigated a number of interventions and techniques for counselors, therapists, and psychologists to use when working in a crisis situation and with families where an extramarital

affair has occurred (e.g. Gordon & Baucum, 1999; Pittman, 1987). Since extramarital affairs were found to be the second most devastating problem facing couples today (Whisman et al., 1997), it is essential that professionals be aware of techniques and interventions that are successful in these situations. Since every family is unique in many aspects and in the intensities of problems they present, it is also important that researchers continue their search for additional techniques for clinicians to utilize with couples and families.

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