

Ask Connie... “Beyond the Affair!”

Dear Connie:

My wife jumped the fence! She told me last week that she slept with some jerk she met at a conference. I don't get it! I work long hours so she can have what she wants, I let her watch her favorite programs when there's no good sports on TV, I take her hunting in the fall and even bought her a rifle for her birthday. OK, so we don't make it as much as we used to, but I'm tired at night and now that she's working she hardly ever has dinner ready when I get home and that makes me grouchy. I'd pack her stuff and put it on the front porch, except we have four kids and I need her.

—Vernon

Dear Vernon:

It is always a painful shock to find out one's spouse has been sexually intimate with someone else. Somehow, even when there are serious problems in the relationship, most people don't anticipate an extramarital affair. Why would someone you think you have been good to hurt you like this? Feelings of anger, betrayal, and confusion are normal, as well as a desire to reject and punish the one who has strayed.

Perhaps your wife told you she slept with someone because she's feeling guilty and wants to ease that guilt by confessing. She may have given in to temptation once and be very remorseful. Or, she told you because she wants to shock you into waking up to the difficulties in the marriage that need to be addressed, or she will find someone else. In any case, there's a crisis. As with any crisis, there is both danger and opportunity. The danger is that the two of you will not be able to, or will not choose to, address the underlying issues that led to this. If you don't, your relationship is likely to deteriorate and lead to divorce. The opportunity is that the affair can be seen as a wake-up call for both of you if you're willing to look at it that way.

It's important that you communicate to your wife how you are feeling, and that she try to listen without defending herself, without rationalizing her behavior. She needs to understand that she has betrayed you and the sacred vow of marriage. Your trust in her has naturally

been destroyed for now and she will have to earn it back. If she wants to stay married to you, she may want you to forgive and forget more quickly than you are able to. She needs to understand that it may take quite a while for you to get beyond this—months, if not years.

Then, equally important, talk about the affair itself. What led her to this? If you listen to your wife, really listen, you will undoubtedly hear some things you haven't heard before, even if she has said them. You may not like what you hear, either, but you need to listen anyway, without interrupting her. We all want to hold on to the idea that we are good, and generous, and treating our partner well, but your wife may not be experiencing you that way at all. It's time for a reality check.

How does she feel about the affair now? Is there an ongoing relationship with the person she slept with? Is she willing to give that up? What is it that she wanted from you that she felt she wasn't getting? There are reasons why she turned to someone else, and there are clues to those reasons in your letter to me.

It is common for people whose partners have had affairs to be obsessed with the details of the affair. This does not help. Pressing for precise details and then reviewing them repeatedly in one's mind generally increases feelings of distress and fuels pain and anger. It is better not to dwell on details, but rather turn the focus toward your own flaws and repairing your relationship with your wife as soon as you

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She is the author of *Gathering the Soul, a True Story of Spiritual Healing*. Pathwork (Pathwork.org) and Imago Relationship Therapy (Gettingtheloveyouwant.org) are two easily accessible sources for the theories upon which much of this column is based.



can. You may find it hard to let go of the pain, anger and mistrust, but if you ask yourself what you can learn from this, you may find that a great deal of personal growth is the end result.

You said you have four children, which indicates you've been married for a few years. It sounds like your wife was the primary homemaker and child care provider until she recently went back to work. Can you talk with her about the changes that her working has created in your home life, and how you feel about it? The majority of women who work continue to carry most of the burden of childcare

and homemaking. Does this seem fair to you? It may not to her. After all, she's probably tired, too, at the end of her work day. What does she want and need from you in order to recommit to the marriage? Sometimes people think they know what their partners want, but without asking they may be just guessing, and guessing incorrectly. The birthday rifle could be a good example of this. Did she want it—or did you?

It's time for some honest communication between you and your wife. She seems to have acted out her feelings rather than telling you about them. Why? Maybe she's tried and tried and you haven't paid attention. This is the kind of situation that can benefit greatly from counseling. If you and your wife want to get beyond the affair, I recommend strongly that you find an experienced couples counselor who can help you through these rough waters. Once you have established honest, compassionate communication patterns, you may find that you're on your way to a better marriage than you've ever had. At the least, you'll have a better understanding of yourselves and one another.

Good luck, Vernon! —Connie

Do you have a relationship question?

Write to Connie at conniem@mcn.net

—and ask!

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