

Dealing with infidelity; how to protect your kids

Nothing tears a family apart like an affair, but why are they so common and what is the best way to deal with them without hurting the children? Johanna Leggatt and Lisa Mayoh report.



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This story first appeared in The Daily Telegraph. By Johanna Leggatt and Lisa Mayoh.

Remember when cheating was a grubby, secretive business? When infidelity was regarded as a severe moral lapse rather than a “discreet lifestyle choice” served up via an online dating site?

That was before the days of sites such as Ashley Madison and Marital Affair, which make something as monumental as infidelity seem mundane and commonplace.

Ashley Madison's slogan, “Life is short. Have an affair” points to a new permissiveness in online relationships. While affairs are still not socially sanctioned, they are far from exceptional.

Yet it was still a shock to many of us when the Ashley Madison data dump revealed one in 17 Sydneysiders had a profile on the “married dating” website. With 251,813 accounts, Sydney rated third in the world of spouses looking to cheat, behind Sao Paulo and New York, the data dump reveals. Almost 39 million people have joined the website since it was launched in 2001.

These figures come as no surprise to relationship counsellor Joanne Wilson, who deals with the fallout from infidelity on a regular basis.

“Cheating has always happened but these days there are so many opportunities and technology has really changed things,” Wilson says.

“Around one-third of couples I see are dealing with infidelity. If a relationship is not going well it is a major temptation for people because it is so easy to do these days.”

And things become even trickier when children are in the picture.

Clinical psychologist Elisabeth Shaw says: only tell children what they need to know.

Broader problem

Sydney clinical psychologist Elisabeth Shaw says where possible, parents should protect their children from the details of their marital woes, with full disclosure only adding to the pain of a potential family breakup.

“Adults make mistakes and can regret it,” she says. “It may be that the adultery, painful and difficult as it may be, could be part of broader relationship problems and exposing one might help expose them all.

“Sometimes though, children come upon the information themselves — in that case it is very hard for the wronged partner to protect the person who has had the affair.

“What is important to remember is the child's perspective — it is not in the child's interest to go into details, or to rubbish the parent.

“It is better to say something like ‘we are having problems but we are going to work on it. We don't need you to get involved.’”

She says children generally know more about tense situations than parents think.



“For



example, they may know there are problems and there has been fighting, but they may not know why," she says. "It is important to answer questions honestly and to initiate conversations when no questions are forthcoming — some kids are scared to ask.

"However, only tell children what they need to know, not what you feel tempted to tell them in anger.

"They may need to honestly hear there is a problem rather than say everything is fine when it is obviously not."

She says if children are being exposed to "ugly, destructive, frightening" fighting it was best to separate — and the most important thing was not to let the children take sides.

"Children need to think well of both their parents. They are entitled to enjoy each parent as a good and worthy person, even if on an intimate level the relationship was not ideal. This is a chance to model relationship skills — fighting fairly, accepting that problems can be fixed and relationships repaired."



Psychotherapist Paul Reid says: You have to take responsibility for your own desires.

Internal compass

Psychotherapist Paul Reid says the temptations of websites such as Ashley Madison mean it's more important than ever for couples to be governed by some kind of internal compass.

"In the past people found a certain stability in the sanctity of marriage in the nuclear family model," Reid says.

"These days society is much more permissive so it becomes harder for people to know where the limits are. There has to be an orienteering principle — people want others to give them answers as to how they should live their life, but you have to take responsibility for your own desires.

"You can't blame sites like Ashley Madison. It is up to you to be self-responsible."

Affairs, Reid notes, do not occur in a vacuum and often are a way for someone to try and separate from a relationship.

"They may be too full of fear to speak about separation so often they will act it out. Then the affair will bring to a head problems that have not been dealt with. It is then up to the couple to decide if they are able to integrate that experience into their history or if they need to go their separate ways."

While the reasons people cheat are many and varied, there are some common themes that Reid has noticed.

Chief among them is a lack of communication, when problems are routinely swept under the carpet.

"If I was to give any advice — and every couple is different — it would be not to avoid that which is conflictual in your relationship." Reid says.

“And the earlier in the relationship you address those issues that are causing you problems, the better.”

Reid has seen many couples fall apart due to infidelity but he has also seen a significant number emerge from the emotional maelstrom stronger than ever.

“For that to take place there needs to be a bond that holds them together through it all, something that goes deeper than the betrayal,” he says.

“A couple may be able to feel it without really being able to express what keeps them together.”

Wilson points out that the early days of a relationship are high in helpful oxytocin — the feel-good hormone that helps us bond with our partner.

“As time goes on we tend to get a bit slack and not put as much effort into our relationships. We tend to take the other person for granted,” Wilson says.

“My advice for couples is to always try and save some of the best of themselves for their partner.”

She says sex is an important part of relationships and many men see it as a way to feel valued by and connected to their partner.

“It’s an incredible union of souls that brings couples together and for men it really is a way for them to feel valued. So for men not having sex can be a big problem. Many can barely function without it. Which is why I often think ladies have to step up and make an effort because it is important. But I also think men need to work at being attractive, too.

“It’s important to ask the men what they are doing to make sex an attractive prospect for their wives.”

Older children

Northern beaches psychologist Gabriela Bilibio says what you tell your children will depend on their ages.

“Let’s assume the children are older and understand the meaning of cheating — in this case, it’s important to talk to them about it,” she says.

“However, it’s important that partners discuss how both will handle it before talking to the children. Things like why this has happened, how you are both feeling about it and what will happen with the family.”

Ms Bilibio, the director of Bilibio Psychology Clinic, says children deserve to be informed about the changes in their lives.

“They don’t need to know information such as cheating, but they need to be told that their parents are going through a difficult time but that they are both working on it,” she says.

“Children as young as babies can feel emotions that their parents are feeling, so pretending to older children that nothing is happening will do more harm to them as they might believe such hostility or no communication is okay in a relationship.”

Questions to help you make a decision

Counsellor Joanne Wilson says ask yourself these questions when faced with a cheating spouse:

- Does my partner display genuine remorse and responsibility to give me the reassurance, attentiveness and empathy I need to recover?



- What support network

(professional or friends and family) do I have to prepare for some of the expected emotional reactions, such as hurt, anger, fear, disgust, sadness and shame?

- Despite the devastation, can I try to understand why my partner cheated? Who did they seek to become?
- Do I need to take responsibility for any demise in the satisfaction of the relationship?
- Did we set aside a regular sacred space in our lives for sex and give it the attention it deserves?
- What are the consequences of my decisions on my family and community, even for generations to come?
- Throughout the intense trauma, how can I ensure I act with integrity so my responses reflect my values?
- In what ways can I healthily learn to trust my own intuition again, forgive and find joy in trust and love for my long-term mental and physical health?

Visit Paul Reid at: counsellingtherapymelbourne.com.au; Joanne Wilson at: theconfidantecounselling.com

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