

Creating a happy marriage is possible and this site is dedicated to providing resources to help couples who want to stay together. By providing information about qualified marriage counseling, we hope to encourage couples to get the help they need. The site also features articles, other websites, books, and workshops which offer the tools needed to create happy, lasting marriages.



After an Affair

This is Stay Happily Married, Episode number 10, "After an Affair."

Welcome to Stay Happily Married, your source for weekly updates on the latest tips and advice to build a happy and healthy marriage.

Today's episode of Stay Happily Married is brought to you by the Rosen Law Firm. For more information, visit us at Rosen.com.

Lee Rosen: I'm Lee Rosen. I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. I'm here with Carmella Broome, a licensed professional counselor who specializes in marriage and family therapy. Carmella practices in Lexington, South Carolina at Crossroads Counseling Center. She works with adults, adolescents, couples and families and has done research on healthy marriage initiatives with the Department of Health and Human Services.

Welcome to the show, Carmella.

Carmella Broome: Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here.

Lee Rosen: Well, I'm so glad you can join us. Now, Lexington is just outside of Columbia; have I got that right?

Carmella Broome: That's correct. We're right in the middle of the state.

Lee Rosen: Middle of South Carolina. Well, I feel like I'm always driving through that part of South Carolina but I'm never actually going there. I'm always on my way somewhere or another but it seems like I end up stopping at a fast food restaurant and that's my --

Carmella Broome: There's a lot more interesting things here. You should stop sometime. The capital building's here, lots of museums; lots of neat stuff in Columbia. It's a nice place to visit.

April 7, 2008 - After an Affair

Lee Rosen: Well, next time I'll get off the highway and maybe we'll have dinner and --

Carmella Broome: Yeah. Call me. We'll have lunch.

Lee Rosen: Right. Okay. Well, you know, I see a lot of couples divorcing and they say, at least, that they're doing it because they have discovered an extramarital affair on the part of the other spouse. In your experience is that a pretty common scenario?

Carmella Broome: It's very common. I read a statistic yesterday that said that 50 percent of couples who come in for counseling come somehow for an issue related to an extramarital affair. It is something I see quite often and it is something very destructive to a marriage. There are a lot of couples who really aren't sure they're going to make it after something like that comes out.

Lee Rosen: Well, pretty devastating, I would think.

Carmella Broome: Uh-huh, very.

Lee Rosen: Do they come right away or is it something that just eats at people until they finally come and see someone like you?

Carmella Broome: I think it can be either way. Sometimes when the initial crisis comes out they immediately say, "Okay, if we're going to have any chance of making this work we need to seek out some professional help."

Sometimes they try to deal with it themselves and realize they're just not getting anywhere and they're stuck. And then they will come in and say, "Well, we have this thing. I can't get past it," or "we just haven't dealt with it and we're not sure if our marriage is going to make it because it's just still something that is impacting us."

But the thing I try to let people know about is that they are not alone in a situation. Affairs are very common. And when we talk about that, statistics vary a lot. But we'll have -- the one that I saw that I've been kind of working with because it's put out in a publication by the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, says 25 percent of men and 15 percent of women will have an affair at some point in their marriages. And that is a sexual affair. If you add in cyber affairs or emotional affairs that don't actually become sexual, then that adds another 20 percent to those statistics.

Lee Rosen: Wow.

Carmella Broome: So even in conservative estimates we're looking at a big chunk of people who one way or another are impacted by affairs in their marriage. It's a big problem.

Lee Rosen: Now, I guess there's no way to research this, but do you think most people get caught eventually? Does it come out? Or do you think a lot of people go to their grave with this secret?

Carmella Broome: I would say more and more now people get caught. In the past it was easier to cover your tracks but the thing I see now is most people get caught because there is some sort of electronic record, whether it's e-mails or cell phone bills or something. We've got caller ID now, so many things we didn't have in the past, and people do tend to leave a trail of some form or another.

Now, sometimes someone will just have a suspicion and they'll hire a private investigator or something; that still happens a lot, but people are getting caught more and more. And I'm sure there are those who get away with it, but there's always the danger of getting caught. And for some people that's part of the excitement. But once you do get caught, it's not nearly as fun anymore.

Lee Rosen: Right. It's funny because you talk about people getting caught. We do another show called NC Divorce Talk Radio and each week we talk about a piece of technology that people can use. And so often that piece of technology relates to figuring out an affair. Like this week it's a little \$300 GPS someone can stick in the car. And last week it was some kind of underwear test kit where you can ship of someone's underwear and test the --

Carmella Broome: Oh.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. I mean, it's pretty icky stuff. But the technology is amazing and this is all available to people in the drug store or on the Internet pretty easily.

Carmella Broome: Technology is changing everything. It makes it easier to have affairs. It makes it easier to get caught. We have people who are insisting their spouses take a lie detector test. And I always say -- and I know you all know this in the legal business -- those are not always reliable.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Carmella Broome: But there are some people who are just not going to rest easy until that's done. So technology is revolutionizing this whole topic of marital infidelity. It makes it easier to meet people. It makes it easier to connect up with people that someone may have formerly been

involved with -- high school, all these reunion websites and stuff like that.

And online affairs are becoming more popular. People play these very elaborate Internet role playing games where they can be whole different characters. So if my character is not even me, but they're having sex with your character, is that cheating? Well, okay, it gets kind of complicated.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Carmella Broome: Technology is changing everything.

Lee Rosen: Right. This is a crazy question, but is it possible that the person who had the affair suffers as much or more than their spouse? Does that make any sense at all?

Carmella Broome: Yes. And it certainly is possible because that person is the one who has to live with the guilt, with the lying, with feeling like I have wrecked my marriage, particularly if they want to take responsibility for it and say, "I messed up. This is my fault. I'm not going to blame my partner. I'm not going to blame the other person. I'm not going to blame society. I'm going to say I made a wrong choice." And when someone is willing to do that and face that, it can be very difficult for them, for whatever the reasons were that contributed or whatever their motivations were.

Most people do not set out to cheat on their spouses, to lie, to manipulate situations, to take advantage of anyone, or to hurt their family. And if they wind up being in a situation where that has happened and they have to really see the consequences and the pain it's caused to their spouse, look at the possibility of losing their marriage, having to impact family if there are children, there are a lot of big consequences and that person kind of has to carry the weight of that and say, "I did this. I did this to my family and what am I going to do about it?"

So it's really all about those who are willing to take the responsibility are really the ones who are going to suffer. And we kind of hope they do feel bad. It bothers me when people don't feel bad and they don't want to take that responsibility and want to cast blame elsewhere, say, "Well, you're just overreacting. Everybody does this and why can't we just move on?" Really willing to look at the consequences of your behavior; there's going to be a lot of anxiety and a lot of negative feeling about what happened.

Lee Rosen: Now, I'm with Carmella Broome -- you can find out more about Carmella at her website, which is www.solutionsforlife.org. And I'll mention that again.

Now, Carmella, let me ask you what is life like in the house? What is the impact of the affair on the marriage? How does that really play itself out at home?

Carmella Broome: There are various stages. But when an affair first comes out, whether it's discovered or whether the spouse confesses -- which it's always better if you confess than if you're caught because then the question is, "Would you ever have told me? How long would this have continued? What else don't I know?" It is very much as if a natural disaster has occurred. The reactions that happen are that intense -- the emotional reactions -- the chaos, the sense of crisis. It is as if a tornado or a hurricane blew your house away, and that's how it feels as far as what the marriage is, particularly for the betrayed spouse, especially if they had no idea the storm was coming. The sky's blue, it's beautiful outside, and all of a sudden there's a storm.

If they had some vision that things weren't going well or that there might be a problem it's a little bit less of a shock. But there's a lot of intense emotionality. There's going to be a lot of anger; there's going to be a lot of not sleeping; there's going to be a lot of questions and emotionality, crying. We normally look at women being the ones who are the betrayed spouse. More and more it's actually women now who are having the affairs, but historically we would say the woman is always the one cheated on and women are the ones who will get more emotional. But men will get very angry.

And so both sides -- there is that horrible sense of betrayal and shock and "I can't believe we're going through this," and yet daily life is trying to continue. And you have to work and you have to take care of your kids, and so there's this sense of people just trying to function with this huge earth-shattering realization that something horrible has happened to them, where their marriage, their life -- nothing is as they thought it was.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Carmella Broome: And so it really is like a natural disaster or a death where people are reeling from it and at least initially trying to figure out, okay, what do we do now? Are we going to divorce? Are we going to try to work this out? What happened? It's really a mess. Really a big mess.

Lee Rosen: A lot of uncertainty. Now, you said something that makes me wonder. You said it's better to confess than to get caught; but is it better to -- if

you really want your marriage to work -- and you've done this; you've made this mistake. But what if you're not going to get caught? You're fairly confident that it's never going to come out. Should you confess or just keep that to yourself?

Carmella Broome: I think you still need to confess. And there are several reasons for that. The biggest thing is this is something that is a secret between spouses, and I do not believe couples should have secrets because then there's automatically a wall between you and your partner. There's something that you know that they don't know that affects their marriage. That's even true if the affair's over and it's been years in the past. I mean, there are certainly times when people don't confess and their marriages are fine, and that's an individual choice. But I think there is always the possibility at any point that something's going to be found out.

Bridges of Madison County was a very good example of that. After everybody's dead they find the letter and they find all these things. I think not wanting to have secrets, not wanting to feel like a liar, not wanting to be in a situation where -- particularly if something is ongoing you're trying to have this whole double life. It's not a good feeling; it's very stressful.

And the other problem that happens sometimes is that the person who is the third party in the affair is going to eventually get fed up and they will sometimes contact the spouse and say, "Do you know what you're husband's doing?" Because he's saying maybe, "I'm going to leave her for you," and eventually people get very fed up.

So there's just a lot of variables, but I think honesty is always the best policy. People need to have marriages that are open and honest. When that is not the situation, that leads to more of a likelihood of an affair happening in the first place.

Lee Rosen: Now, what are people doing now -- if they're not coming to see a professional, what are they doing to try to make the marriage work? What is their self-help solution? What do most families try to do when this has happened in their marriage?

Carmella Broome: Probably the biggest thing I see people try to do is sweep it under the rug. They'll find out it happened, we want to stay together, we've recommitted to each other, and we're just not going to talk about it. If we ignore it, it will go away. If we don't talk about it, then the betrayed person won't have to know all the details; it might really set them off. And the person who did it is always the one wanting to say, "Okay, that's over now. Let's move on."

Lee Rosen: Right.

Carmella Broome: And what happens with that is that it is not really put to rest, so there's a ghost that kind of is there and haunts the marriage and eventually it may become something that has to be addressed; something else brings it out. Or someone will come in and say, "I'm really depressed and I'm anxious." And we'll start talking and eventually I figure out, "Well, yeah, there was this affair. I've never really worked through it and I'm always worried it's going to happen again. And I just don't know if I can trust my spouse."

Time doesn't heal. If you just give something time, that doesn't automatically make it better. It's what you do with the time that makes the situation better. So for people to sweep it under the rug, really not effective at all because the betrayed spouse usually has a lot of concerns and issues around what happened that are never addressed, and it does come back to haunt them.

Lee Rosen: If they come and they see you, what do you do to help them work things out and heal the relationship? How can you help?

Carmella Broome: There's a lot of things that we do as counselors. There's been a lot of research on what works and what doesn't. The first thing that I'm going to make sure of is, is the affair still happening? Because if it is, if there is still contact with that person in any way, that has to stop.

That can get really tricky when you're looking at workplace affairs because we've got folks who are still in the same business or the same office space, and we'll say, "Can you change jobs? Is there any way that that's possible?" Because that's not unreasonable for a spouse to say, "I just don't want you working there anymore. I don't care if we have to take a pay cut or whatever."

If the person does still have to be in contact with the third party because of work or because of children -- because some people will actually go back and have affairs with their former spouses; it gets real interesting -- we will say, okay, any time there's communication with that person your spouse needs to know that it happened, whether it was work or outside of work or you ran into them somewhere. That has to be very open so the spouse can see it. But there needs to be an official, "My spouse knows we've been involved. I do not want to be involved with you anymore. Please don't call me or contact me. This is over." And the spouse who was betrayed needs to feel okay about that.

And then the next thing I do is to tell the spouse who had the affair, "It is your responsibility to answer any questions that your partner has about what happened." And a lot of people don't want to do that, like I

said, because -- oh, they're not going to like what they find out. But this is something that is being kept from the spouse that affected their marriage significantly and they deserve to know whatever it is they want to know.

And then what I say to the betrayed spouse is, "Okay, before you ask, be sure you want to know." Because a lot of times what will happen is they'll find out and then they'll freak out. And I'm saying it's kind of like without a lesson. You can't say, "It's better for you if you tell me the truth about what you did," and then ground them for the rest of their lives for doing something you didn't want them to do.

There's got to be a sense of "you're being honest with me and I'm appreciate that and I'm going to take in what you tell me and try not to completely lose my temper and start screaming," even though that's certainly to be expected and a lot of spouses will say, "Well, I deserve that. I'll take it and I deserve it." But some people will clam up and say, "Well, great day. You started throwing dishes at me. I'm not going to tell you anything else."

Lee Rosen: Right.

Carmella Broome: So we work on creating this climate where it is not so much an interrogation as it is more of a conversation like you and I are having - - a journalist and an interviewee of, "Explain it to me. What about this? What about that? What about this?" Because people do need to know what happened, if they want to. And it's really up to the betrayed person to say, "Here's what I want to know," and, "today I'm wondering about this," and to have some time where they're just getting their questions answered.

And it's not fun for anybody, but sometimes you have to break a leg before you can set it. And it's very painful, but people need to really know what they're dealing with. So we help people to be able to talk about it, tell them that that really is the best thing to do, and that it's going to be a long haul.

I want to normalize for people, a) affairs happen. Every couple is unique, but they are not the only couple who has ever faced an affair; I see it in my office all the time. And that people do recover from it. I want people to understand that there is hope. Even if they're not sure yet if they want to stay married, to say, "I don't want you to make a hasty decision." And two-thirds of couples stay together after affairs.

Lee Rosen: Really?

Carmella Broome: I want people to know it can get better. Your marriage is never going to be the same, but different can be better. Sometimes people have to face losing something to realize how much they want it. A lot of normalizing and then we do a lot of "here are the steps that we need to go through."

Lee Rosen: So they're going to stop the affair; that's number one.

Carmella Broome: Oh, absolutely.

Lee Rosen: They're going to disclose everything, if that's what the other spouse really wants to do.

Carmella Broome: They're going to disclose whatever the partner wants to know.

Lee Rosen: And then we're into this whole phase of normalizing and moving forward. Are there more steps, or where does it go from there?

Carmella Broome: Well, once the information is out, people kind of want to look at what led to this happening and how do we keep it from happening again? How do I know my spouse is not going to do this again? So we want to help couples have a more honest relationship where they're not keeping secrets, where they're not lying to each other either by omission or commission; where there's a lot of open talk if they're attracted to someone, if there's a money issue, whatever spots they have. Just about everything where they're more open and honest with each other. Create that climate of the marriage being a safe place to talk about anything.

And then what we also want to look at is how do we build up the positives in their marriage so that if there were problems in the marriage that, I guess I would say, leave someone to be more vulnerable to an affair -- because I'm never going to say, "Oh, your partner was not nice to you and therefore you had every right to have an affair."

Lee Rosen: Right.

Carmella Broome: Having an affair is never the solution to the problem. People choose to engage in that kind of behavior. So if there were problems in the marriage that might have made someone more vulnerable, we're going to figure out, what were those? How do we help the betrayed spouse to see that there are things they can do to make their marriage better? Not because we're trying to criticize them, but because we want them to have control. When they know from their partner what would be helpful to them, it gives them some control over their own actions and

feeling like, okay, now I know more what my partner needs. So we work on the communication.

We work on when were times when the marriage was good. What was working? What did you like to do together? Make sure you have some time as a couple where you're just focused on being partners. Not on your kids, not on your businesses, not on whatever else; but really nurturing the marital relationship, the intimacy, the affection, the talking, where they feel like they're rebuilding their positives and that they're really reestablishing connection. And that is going to be real important to helping them feel like they want to stay together because the affair is not a fun thing. There need to be times when they are not just focused on that.

Lee Rosen: Right. Right.

Carmella Broome: So that's another piece of what we do.

And then the other part of it is helping them to feel comfortable with the idea of there are things we can do to make this less likely to happen again. One of those things -- the biggest thing I think that gets people in trouble is just not having good boundary. We're hanging out with opposite sex people at work, we're getting in touch with people on the Internet, and we're not knowing when to say this relationship is becoming too important or too close.

So I talk to people a lot about how to set those boundaries so that you're preventing a problem from creeping up on you in the first place, because it usually is a slippery slope situation that people get involved in, whether it's emotional or sexual. But they get caught up in feelings. They get caught up in a moment and there's been a million little things that led to that, but if we'd stopped at any point along that slope downward it would not have happened, most likely.

Lee Rosen: Right. Right.

Carmella Broome: People don't set out to just, "Oh, I think I'm entitled. I'm going to cheat on my spouse." That does happen. There are people who think they should be allowed to just have it both ways, everything they want any time. But most people don't want to do that. Most people do not expect to wind up being someone who does something like that.

Lee Rosen: It sounds -- you describe it in a short period of time and in some ways it sounds very easy intellectually. But it sounds like it's a lot of tough work emotionally to work through this.

Carmella Broome: It's very hard. It's very hard. It is a very long haul. And I tell people, "This is going to be a roller coaster. It's going to be one step forward, two steps back," because there are always new things that come up in someone's mind. There are triggers that will remind them of the affair. There are other issues that come up. Like I said, life continues and so you're still dealing with whatever you had going on before, plus this whole other thing. And it really will sometimes kind of go in circles, just the way it is if someone's recovering from any other kind of trauma.

So I will tell people, "Look, it is going to take work. It is not going to be easy. But if you love your spouse and you love your kids and you're committed to your marriage, it deserves a chance." And sometimes that just means saying, "Okay, can you give me three months? Can you give me six months where we work really hard?" And that means working with me, that means reading books, that means being very intentional about their conversations and what they do between sessions. Can we at least try for this period of time to see what we can do before you start talking divorce?

Because I never want people to leave a marriage feeling like, "I didn't try hard enough. There were things I could have done. I gave up too soon." And there are so many people who do wind up having a better marriage because of the affair and it eventually does not become the thing that defines the marriage; it becomes a chapter. It's unpleasant. It's not like it's ever forgotten.

And there are always things that'll be different. There are going to be more of a need for checking behind the person on the cell phone. If you're going to be late, call your spouse and let them know. Need to be more check-ins, need to be more of an open book, and that's just one of the consequences. I tell people, "If you're not prepared to deal with that, you should have thought about that before you went and had an affair."

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, you know the most encouraging thing you said -- and it really amazes me, but it's great to hear -- is that two-thirds of marriages do survive affairs. And that --

Carmella Broome: Now, if they survive well or if they just kind of survive --

Lee Rosen: But they get through it, somehow, some way.

Carmella Broome: Right.

Lee Rosen: So it sounds to me like if that's what you want to do, at least the odds are in your favor. So it's definitely worth giving it a try. I see so many

people that just flip out when this happens and walk away and never look back.

Carmella Broome: Oh, most people say, "If my spouse cheated on me, that would be it." Bust most of the time -- a lot of the time -- once it happens someone will rethink that. "Is that really what I want to do? Do I want to get a divorce? Do I want to do this to the kids? Do I want to do this to us?" And it does become a bigger question.

And I encourage people any time there's a crisis you don't want to make a hasty decision. And there really is hope that things can be better and I think now that making things better is if we do things "the right way," which means I don't find out a few weeks later -- when you told me you cut off contact -- that you're still talking to that person. Or I don't find out there's been previous infidelity. Or the person who was involved in the affair is not going to say, "I'm just not willing to talk about this anymore and you're just going to have to get over it." It really is all about how the affair is handled from both sides that's going to be such a key as to whether they survive it well or if they survive it in pieces.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, Carmella, thank you so much for being with us today. I really appreciate all the good advice you've given.

Carmella Broome: My pleasure. It's not a pleasant topic, but it's certainly common. And we want to help people to have better marriages, even through something that a lot of folks would think they can't survive. Survival is very possible.

Lee Rosen: Well, I really believe that this show will help some of our listeners to avoid going through a divorce. I think that you've really given people a lot of hope and a lot to think about and a lot to work on. So thanks so much.

And I would hope that all of you got something out of this today. And if you would like to contact Carmella Broome, her website is www.solutionsforlife.org. And of course I'll put a link to that in the show notes so that you can click on it and get right to her site.

Carmella Broome: I can also be contacted by e-mail at CounselorCarmella@hotmail.com.

Lee Rosen: Great. We'll put a link to your e-mail address in the show notes as well. Thanks so much for that.

If you have comments about the show, we would love to hear form you. You can reach us on our comment line at (919) 256-3083, or feel free to e-mail us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com.

April 7, 2008 - After an Affair

Thank you so much for joining us and we hope to talk with you again next week.

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