

Announcer: Infidelity in a Marriage. This is Stay Happily Married, Episode number 300.

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

Scott: I'm Scott Blair, and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. Are you affected by infidelity in your marriage? Infidelity appears to be a hot trend in marriage these days. We are plagued with stories about our friends or family members subject to adultery and cheating in their relationships. With social media constantly creating means of communication, we are continuously able to connect with others and share our stories, concerns, and problems. This readily accessible means of communication can lead to effortless temptations to become unfaithful to our loved ones.

Affairs can be either emotional or sexual or a combination of both. Whether they are emotional, sexual or both, there are consequences that may lead to emotional distress to the other spouse. What happens when your spouse or loved one violates the set of rules in your relationship by betraying their fidelity? Lesli Doares is a licensed marriage and family therapist with a private practice in Cary, North Carolina, and in her practice, balanced family therapy, her focus is on helping couples build strong, secure relationships.

It is her belief that marriage is a different kind of a relationship and with the proper tools and techniques, most couples can have a happy and successful relationship. Lesli brings both her personal experience and professional training to her work with couples. Her passion and belief in marriage has led to the development of a five step theoretical approach that Lesli detailed in her book, "Blueprint for a Lasting Marriage: How to create your happily ever after with more intention, less work." Lesli also writes a Fearless Marriage blog, where she addresses common challenges to today's marriage.

Welcome to the show, Lesli. I'm so glad that you could join us today.

Lesli: I'm so glad to be here.

Scott: Well, Lesli, you are here to talk to us today about infidelity in a marriage. Can you tell us a little bit about what you have observed when it comes to infidelity?

Lesli: Well, infidelity seems to be on the rise, and there are a lot of potential reasons for that. One of those is access to social media. We can find people and engage in people in ways we've never been able to before. Another thing is that with more and more men and women working together, so we've got somebody who shares our interests and it's all very exciting. And so we kind of forget about what the boundaries are.

And there are also some online sites such as Ashley Madison that actually go out and promote infidelity. And you put on that to some of the stresses that a lot of marriages are under, some unhappiness in the marriage, or lack of an understanding of what it takes to create a successful marriage and it's kind of a perfect storm of events.

Scott: Well, what problems do you see that couples are experiencing in the relationship when infidelity occurs?

Lesli: Now, are you asking about what causes it or what happens afterwards?

Scott: What happens afterwards?

Lesli: Basically, it's a huge shock to the system. Frequently, before an affair is discovered or acknowledged, one partner might feel that something's a little bit off. Maybe they're experiencing some distancing, or avoidance or unresolved conflict, and so maybe they'll ask, is there something wrong? And the other person will go, no, no, everything's fine. And then maybe they'll even be some, well you seem to be mentioning this person more or you seem to be, you know, when I walk into the room you quickly put down your phone.

So this can lead to questions and checking of emails and cell phones and questioning people, and in fact, sometimes people will even ask, are you having an affair? And they'll be told, no, absolutely not, you're crazy, I don't know what you're talking about. And then it all comes out, and so the person really does think that they were crazy. They stop being able to trust their own instincts. Both partners engage on what I call a giant roller coaster ride where the emotions are all over the place. Sometimes they want to save the marriage, sometimes they just want to end it. There's anger, there's shock. It's just a wild ride, and it rocks people to their very, very core.

Scott: And what type of short term and long-term negative effects do you see once this is discovered in a relationship?

Lesli: Well, a lot of the reactions are fear-based reactions. Let's just put this behind us as quickly as possible, we'll just kind of paper over the differences, you promised to stop. It'll be all okay. But they haven't really dealt with the grief and the underlying hit that the relationship took. Others will immediately separate and start divorce proceedings while they're in the midst of that hurt and that anger. And the hurt and the anger is completely understandable, but any time we make reactions based on strong emotions, we frequently go from the fire into the frying pan.

And as one of those things, we take out Facebook ads, or we tell all the friends and family and not only is it the couple that's impacted, sometimes people will tell their children in a way to try to get their loyalty, or make their partner's life miserable, and it just creates even more of a problem than if they were able to find a way to deal with it a little bit more healthily and a lot more quietly.

Scott: I like how you said they take out Facebook ads. I've seen that actually, a few times. Obviously, one person's hiding the affair, the other person probably has this gut feeling something's going on. But at what point do you actually see the couples become aware that this behavior on one side or the other is hurting the relationship?

Lesli: Well, in the best possible cases, the person who has actually stepped outside the marriage realizes that what they're doing isn't solving the problem that they thought it would be solving, and they get an awareness that if they continue down this pathway, it's going to be really bad.

And so they'll step back and stop the relationship. Unfortunately, sometimes just that knowledge that you've done it can create distance and problems in the relationship.

And so the other partner will become aware of it, and they might actually go get some help, but sometimes this actually doesn't come up unless a therapist specifically asks. And then, of course, then we start that whole denial thing unless, of course, we're doing it individually with the people. And then, of course, once the affair is discovered, then all bets are off because there is going to be an impact, and it matters whether or not the person who stepped outside the relationship offers up that information versus the other person discovering it, because that also changes the impact on the relationship.

Scott: Sure. Over the years, in my personal life, I've been shocked a few times about some of the couples that it's been discovered, the infidelity issues. But from your professional standpoint, are there any trends among recognizing what type of couple might have an issue with this?

Lesli: Well, to be honest, I think every couple is at risk unless they are taking steps to protect their relationship. And I say that, even though there are probably some times when relationships are a little bit more at risk. The first couple of years, maybe, of marriage, when people aren't really quite understanding what's expected or how to fully commit to a marriage. Sometimes when children come on the scene, there's a distancing between the partners where they're so focused on being parents and providing that they forget to be partners and lovers and friends with each other. And then that makes it risky to the outside.

Sometimes just the length of a marriage. There's a cliché called, you know, familiarity breeds contempt. And that frequently can show up in relationships where maybe there's an ongoing problem that hasn't been resolved, and they haven't agreed to disagree. They keep fighting about it or it's simmering on the back burner. And so anything that leaves one partner feeling emotionally, I don't want to say ignored, that's too strong of a word, but emotionally vulnerable.

And sometimes that's just not even having your emotional needs met because a lot of people don't even realize we have them. And then somebody comes along and starts meeting this emotional need you didn't know you had, and then it's like, wow, I'm going to that person. So there's a lot of places and times in relationships where if you don't have the right tools, your relationship can be at risk.

Scott: So when an occurrence of infidelity surfaces, other than staying away from running the Facebook ads, what do you suggest that a couple do because I'm sure it's really emotional. You probably can't think straight. So where do you usually start? What do you suggest that they do?

Lesli: Well, the first thing that I suggest that they do, and this is going to sound rather trite and I don't mean it to be, but breathe. We seriously underestimate the value of just breathing, being calm, trying to get your ground to stop shaking. And one of the best ways to do this is to seek out professional help from somebody specifically who has a lot of experience dealing with this very emotional and difficult issue. It's somebody who's got to be used to dealing with the roller coaster of emotions, with the anger, with the fear, with the sadness, with the confusion, and that's

a whole lot to be in a room with, and if you don't have somebody who's trained in dealing with that, it's going to be really, really tough.

Scott: Are there any specific items that you can kind of drill down on that couples could work on when this infidelity surfaces?

Lesli: Absolutely. When I work with clients around infidelity, I tell each of them that they have a very, very specific job to do. The person who has stepped outside the relationship must, from that point in time, become completely transparent. I tell them that even little white lies are no longer open to them, because if they lie to their partner again, they're going to do serious damage.

There also has to be true remorse, which can be a real difficult situation, because some people really aren't sorry for having the experience of the affair, but they are sorry for the pain that they caused, and that's really the important piece. And they have to be willing to make the changes that will put the relationship back together.

And then for the person who was betrayed, their job is to be able to choose to look at the overall relationship, try to get an understanding of what was behind the infidelity and then choosing to forgive and to rebuild the relationship. And I know that those are big, big hurdles for a lot of people.

Scott: Well, if they're able to get over that hurdle and they're actually able to get past this episode of infidelity, working with professional help, what are some of the changes that you're seeing in the quality in the interactions of those relationships?

Lesli: It makes the relationship more real. We all kind of walk around with fantasy and expectation and what we think is the perfect relationship. And that's all kind of done in a bubble, and when you face a big challenge like infidelity and you can come out on the other side, you learn a lot of the skills that we don't teach people. You learn how to be what I call gently honest about your feelings, about your needs, what you would like the relationship to look like. You become more open to hearing what your partner needs and more willing to give it to them.

And this really makes the relationship so much more intimate and so much stronger than if you had never had this challenge. Now, I think that people can learn this without actually having to go through the trauma of infidelity, but there can be a silver lining to this if people can really drill down and pull up their best selves and see how many other people are impacted by their choices and then take the steps to make it better.

Scott: Well, for anyone who has sought out this episode, Lesli, that might be going through this, and we all know how damaging and traumatic and emotional this could be. Is there anything else you think our listeners should know?

Lesli: I do, and it's one of the things that drives my reason for being in my career, is that our choices impact those around us, especially the children. And if you have kids, you can't actually ever get rid of your partner because they're going to be in your life as long as your kids are. And

so if you can get past the hurt and anger, which is essential to being good co-parents, then that can give you the opportunity to get back together again. Once you get, it's the hurt and the anger and those hard emotions that keep you from being able to work with your partner, and you're going to have to work with them as a co-parent.

So infidelity doesn't have to be the end. It can actually be the beginning, and a lot of times our kids, even though they don't have a concept of what infidelity means, they certainly do pick up the emotional undercurrents, and most parents want to give their kids the best start they can, and one way is to be able to work through the hurt and anger, whatever the cause. That prevents the parents from working together in the best interest of the kids.

Scott: Well, I'm really glad to hear you say putting the best interest of the kids in front. Lesli, thank you so much for talking with us today and being on the show.

Lesli: Thank you for having me.

Scott: To find out more about Ms. Lesli Doares and her practice, Balanced Family Therapy, you can visit their website www.afearlessmarriage.com or call 919-924-0463 for an appointment. Thank you so much for joining us today, and I hope you'll join us again next week. For more information about this show and previous episodes, visit us at stayhappilymarried.com. I'm Scott Blair. Until next time, stay happily married.

Announcer: Thank you for joining us today on Stay Happily Married. If you'd like more information, please visit us on the web at stayhappilymarried.com. We would love to hear your feedback or comments. Please email us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com or call us at 919-256-3083. Until next time, best wishes.