

REVELATIONS COUNSELING & CONSULTING, LLC
THERAPEUTIC MOMENTS – WINTER 2017

What About Love?

What about love

Don't you want someone to care about you?

What about love

Don't let it slip away

What about love

I only want to share it with you

You might need it someday—

Heart, 1985

Clarifying the Search for True Intimacy

As social media and “reality” entertainment has become a more influential facet of American culture, we are witnessing a corresponding voyeuristic fascination with the sexual habits, indiscretions and infidelities occurring within our ecosystem. Every week popular culture reveals another celebrity, politician, or recent icon of social interest whose sex life is now laid bare (pardon the pun) for the world to view, judge, and comment upon. What generally drives this fascination is an attempt to continuously assess our own normalcy—and vulnerabilities—as it pertains to our respective sexual identities.

What is unfortunate is how it also appears to be driving more sexual experimentation and exploration, with decidedly less emphasis on monogamy and relational intimacy. Kinsey’s 1948 research on the topic found that, at the time, approximately 30% of men and 20% of women had acknowledged extramarital sexual intercourse in their first marriage (The Kinsey Institute, 2011). Just 35 years later, a study on extramarital affairs found that, “extramarital coitus seem to be at least 50% for married men,” and that married women were “approaching the same level” (Wiederman, 1997, p. 167). This study also noted that the trend towards higher prevalence of infidelity was particularly apparent within the cohort of men and women less than 40 years of age where it was reported that, “there was no gender difference in the likelihood of reporting lifetime experience with EMS [extramarital sex]” (Wiederman, 1997, p. 171).

While sexual intercourse seems to be the most definitive example of adultery, when emotional affairs and pornography are included—which are objectively perceived by most partners as unfaithfulness—then the social epidemic touches nearly every single marriage over the lifetime of that partnership. Pornography has become a virtual *paramour* for a significant number of men today, and despite the fact that very few would boast about ‘viewing porn’ as being one of their favorite hobbies, this private pastime has become a global industry with an annual market value of more than \$100 billion. Consider the following trends that have been publicized within various sources: (a) porn sites receive more regular traffic than Netflix, Amazon, & Twitter combined each month; (b) 35% of all internet downloads are porn-related; (c) at least 30% of all data transferred across the internet is porn-related; and (d) porn is a global industry, estimated at \$97 billion, with about \$12 billion of that coming from the U.S.

With the apparent increased prevalence of extramarital affairs and sexual exploration through the increased viewing of pornography, it would also seem logical that American society would adopt a corresponding ambivalence as it pertains to remaining faithful in committed relationships. Ironically, that does not appear to be the case.

In a society that seems to increasingly adopt post-modern thinking where values are relative and personal constructs for “right and wrong” behaviors are individual choices, the construct that sexual infidelity is both deceptive and unacceptable behavior remains almost universally accepted and has remained consistent over time. Some peer-reviewed studies found that 94% of individuals judged extramarital sex to be “always wrong” or “almost always wrong”, and even separate cohorts of men and women in the same study who had confessed to extramarital sex reported a disapproval of their own adultery—78% of men and 79% of women, respectively, under the same criteria (Wiederman, 1997). This moral construct also appears to remain consistent among numerous cultures and ethnicities throughout the world, as more than 90% of people surveyed throughout the world cite extramarital sex as “wrong” (King, 2009, p. 259). One large study found that 160 cultures worldwide identify infidelity as the most commonly stated reason for conjugal dissolution (Shackleford & Buss, 1997, p. 1034).

It should lead us to question what perpetuates this clear values conflict between the need to idealize faithfulness, but increasing numbers of individuals have easily rationalized sexual exploration outside of committed relationships.

The cycle of infidelity usually begins when the couple stops confiding in one another, and when we become accustomed to keeping secrets from our partners, we begin to feel disconnected and disenchanted (Gottman & Silver, 2012). Contemporary popular culture certainly offers no restraint on the conscience in this cycle. In fact, Esther Perel, renowned couples therapist and author of the recent book, *State of Affairs: Rethinking Infidelity*, describes the millennial pattern of FOMO—or “fear of missing out”. This belief system among many young adult couples today leads to divorce not because they cannot work through their relational issues, but because they are obsessed with the idea that their lives might be better with someone else!

Think about that concept for just a moment and attempt to internalize the blinded narcissism that defines the rationale behind this belief system. Imagine if the partner you have today was perpetually measuring the value you bring to their life—sexually, emotionally, financially, etc.—and continuously surveilling and comparing you with his or her other options. Ask yourself: Is that what I am doing?

We hypothesize that the reason extramarital affairs remain universally offensive among all humankind is the pre-conscious idealization of intercourse presumes some level of unconditional acceptance and vulnerability by our partners. This may even have a biological premise in that, the release of vasopressin and oxytocin during sexual activity actually facilitates a behavioral imprinting of connection and bonding with the partner (Straub, 2017). The basis of attachment theory finds that all human beings have a deep desire for intimacy. Even Maslow, who developed the famed ‘hierarchy of needs’ theory, remarked that, “people need to love and feel loved and to belong in contexts such as family and community” (Craig & Baucum, 2002, p. 475). When sexual encounters become meaningless and relationships have no resiliency, then the preconscious idealization is replaced with a lost hope for intimacy that ultimately leads to

despair.

Secure attachment enables both emotional intimacy and sexual fidelity within a relationship; however, when these skills have been inadequately developed within the individual from early childhood, the capacity for emotional commitment and intimacy is repressed. As the inevitable stress or conflict within a marriage relationship emerges, the sexual fidelity within the couple is at risk. The moral values system within most individuals that finds adultery to be “wrong” seems to be aligned with the preconscious imprint and the enduring need for deep intimacy. When the desperation reaches a heightened pitch, however, the compulsion for connection can be overridden. The moral dilemma becomes even more acute during an affair because the deception fuels the shame that often accompanies adulterous behavior. However, the individual can always resolve the shame by simply discarding the relationship—without even realizing that the perverse cycle for more failed relationships lies just ahead.

Consequently, American culture has become wildly confused with the psychosocial dysfunction that comes with substituting emotional intimacy with sexual activity. If insecure attachment is extant within a developing relationship, then sexual consummation in the absence of a genuine emotional investment will almost certainly predict a short-lived and dysfunctional coupling. Let’s be very clear—every partner in a marriage brings some level of poorly developed attachment skills. You might have heard it called your “baggage”. When this “baggage” is not resolved (usually with some good premarital counseling), one or both will become quickly disenchanted with their personal interactions and their sex life (and the latter generally precedes the former). As dissent grows, one or both partners will seek an emotional or sexual connection outside of the marriage as a self-soothing coping mechanism. Since the lifespan crisis of resolving intimacy versus isolation has been inaptly resolved during development in adolescence or young adulthood through sexual encounters devoid of real emotional investment, the marriage partner may seek extramarital relationships as a means to soothe the re-traumatization of their insecure attachment that is being re-experienced within the failing marital bond.

Ironically, the unfaithful partner may not only be seeking to soothe the intimacy deficit within their marriage, but the attachment disorder of early childhood. If unresolved childhood sexual trauma is also a part of the partner’s history, the risk factors are even higher.

So what? Well, first, marriage is not for the faint of heart, and requires some distress tolerance, negotiation skills, and self-sacrificial attachment competencies. Second, the consequences of misplacing sexual expression outside the construct of marriage will make you miserable.

The gift of intimacy—the innate need within all of us to be loved and known—lies within the sacred construct of a committed relationship that is seeking reciprocal and unconditional acceptance. In marriage, we should be making a loving, lifelong commitment to be ministers to one another. The etiology of adultery appears to be directly related to an intrinsic ache and yearning for the intimate connection, but not willing to make the personal investment to achieve it. The common themes throughout the body of literature suggests that this need is never met when sexual expression precedes the emotional connection, communication, and mutual trust necessary for successful coupling.

True intimacy engenders sexual fidelity that not only fulfills a deep intrapersonal need, but also facilitates our own personal psychosocial development. This need is fulfilled within the profound mystery of marriage that instructs us in the paradoxical endeavor of self-sacrifice without losing the authentic self.

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