

CHAPTER

12

The Mate Switching Hypothesis for Infidelity

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Abstract

Infidelity toward obtaining a new partner is commonly abetted by the tendency, especially during the peak reproductive years, to continually assess other potential companions' mate value, suitability, and availability. The strategy of maintaining a relationship while seeking other partners can be adaptive for several reasons: (1) Whether in service of finding a new partner or not, infidelity offers the male more potential childbearing partners and provides the female a means to obtain genes from a partner with a superior phenotype, (2) extradyadic sex potentially creates a bond with a new partner and can add to one's perceived security in a relationship while paradoxically easing leaving it, and (3) infidelity can act to mitigate the financial or emotional risks of leaving a partner who has become less desirable. Mate switching infidelity is abetted by many intrinsic factors such as males' tendency to reflexively attend to those with salient sexual features and females' propensity to remain vigilant for new partners who offer superior genes, status, and resources. This chapter details these and several other cultural and evolutionary forces that underlie the mate switching hypothesis of infidelity. It also presents case studies to illuminate the psychological and clinical implications of this practice.

Key Words: mate switching, infidelity, CBT, evolutionary psychology, counseling

When people form romantic bonds there is usually a strong correlation between the intensity of their passion and their expectations for the duration of the relationship. People in love hope and expect to be with

their paramour for life. If romantic love were both deep and reliable, most relationships would fulfill this expectation. Unfortunately, the factors that bring people together are often volatile and have short half-lives. The fact that approximately half of all marriages end in divorce ([Abrams, 2016](#)) supports this. This results from the volatility of the bonds that sustain relationships, most notably romantic love that tends to diminish in just a few years. Since monogamous relationships are accompanied by partners increasingly performing reassessments of the value of their mate along with vigilance for new mates, most couplings will be precarious.

As Buss has pointed out ([Buss et al., 2017](#)), people continue to assess their marketability and to evaluate new potential mates even when in a stable relationship. The self-assessment for marketability to a new mate increases with weak attachment, low relationship satisfaction, a decline in sexual passion ([Negash et al., 2019](#); [Guilbault et al., 2020](#)), distrust in a partner's fidelity, and one's having a large number of prior lovers ([Maddox, 2013](#)).

The forces that drive people to seek new mates are in a continual battle with a socially endorsed ideal of lifelong bonds. This social imperative contrasts with our tendency for transient monogamy and multiple sexual partners, which we share with other primates. Despite the best efforts of many well-intentioned individuals, innate inclinations often overwhelm the imperatives imposed by marriage or partners' strong intentions of fidelity. We humans simply are not evolved to remain with one partner exclusively and indefinitely. When we nevertheless do so, it is often with frustration and resentment. Intimate bonds during our ancestral past did not adhere to the Western standard of stable monogamy. Indeed, monogamy is rare. In their book *The Myth of Monogamy*, Barash and Lipton (2001) convincingly argue for an innate human tendency for polygamy. They point out that virtually no animals are monogamous, including birds, the genus most often cited as emblematic of monogamy and lifetime mating. Extrapair copulations (EPCs), or what human couples would denote as cheating, are common in birds. Birds like the passerine (*Passeriformes*) and the cockatiel (*Nymphicus hollandicus*), which are known to have stable bonds, also have a significant number of offspring fathered by males outside the pair bond ([Fossøy et al., 2006](#); [Spoon et al., 2007](#)). There is also the disillusioning case for the paradigmatic lifetime mating of the prairie vole. These rodents do indeed stay

together for life, but the female very often finds the time to mate with other males ([Ledford, 2008](#)).

The idyllic goal of marriage for life is more a function of social mores, imposed chiefly in Western countries and in modern times, than a biological reality. Indeed, Helen Fisher and her colleagues observed that 84% of human societies had permitted some form of polygyny ([Tsapelas et al., 2011](#)). And when social values permit polygyny, monogamous marriage for life becomes somewhat rare. The tendency to seek extrarelationship lovers is documented in every culture throughout history ([Abrams, 2016](#)). In the staid 1950s, [C. S. Ford and the psychologist Frank A. Beach \(1951\)](#) studied 185 human societies and found that 39% approved of extramarital sexual relationships. The bonds of matrimony and other committed relationships are viewed with wariness by the evolutionary psychologist Gordon Gallup, who has estimated that 10%–30% of children are sired by men who are not their legal fathers (cited in [Abrams, 2016](#)).

Just as humans have evolved mechanisms to identify people who exploit reciprocal obligations, it seems that we also have them to detect potentially unfaithful mates. This existence of a fidelity cheater detection mechanism is supported by the 15-fold higher nonpaternity rates among men suspicious of their paternity than males with high paternity confidence. Gallup has also pointed out (cited in [Abrams, 2016](#)) that the high rate of extrapair pregnancy is a proxy measure of the high rate of female infidelity. Suppose one assumes that most women who engage in extrapair copulations (EPCs) actively attempt to prevent pregnancy. In that case, the 10%–30% rate of nonpaternity implies a much higher rate of EPCs among women.

The ability to detect infidelity may result from an adaptation that underlies jealousy and mate-guarding behaviors (e.g., [Buss, 2002](#)). From an evolutionary psychological perspective, an individual who can read an unfaithful partner's affective and behavioral cues would have increased fitness and thereby pass along more offspring. A woman who can identify a man prone to infidelity can minimize the risk of losing resources. Such a man would divert resources away from her and her progeny. In turn, a man who can detect the cues that signal potential or ongoing infidelity by a female partner can minimize the high costs of cuckoldry. Ancestral times were characterized by lethal violence, disease, and deprivation, which yielded a life expectancy not much longer than 30 years

([Kaplan et al., 2000](#)). A man in such an epoch spending even a year or two providing sustenance and care to the progeny of another male paid a devastating price in genetic fitness. Men who were vigilant for competing males, put significant effort into mate guarding, and responded with violent rage when their monogamy was threatened, were more successfully in avoiding cuckoldry. The violent rage that was adaptive eons ago continues to be expressed by evolved mechanisms in modern men, often with very adverse consequences. These evolved mechanisms still compel male behaviors that may be destructive to male reproductive potential in modern times. The profound trauma that ensues when discovering that the person to whom one is emotionally or sexually committed has been unfaithful has its origins in the evolved psychological mechanism that protects a man from the genetically destructive act of providing time and resources to the progeny of a competitor. An early human who took a laissez-faire approach to his mate's behavior would have an increased chance of investing in other males' offspring and a diminished likelihood of leaving his own offspring and genes to survive in posterity. As a result, "jealous" genes are more prevalent in modern men.

Besides sexual infidelity, there is also romantic infidelity. The latter is more common in women, who might develop a deep romantic bond with another man (or on occasion with a woman) without ever having sex. Although husbands and lovers find this disturbing, it does not approach the emotional firestorm that ensues when the infidelity is sexual and might expose them to the risk of raising another man's child. David Buss's contention that it is a male adaptation that produces violent jealousy in the face of sexual infidelity is supported by the negative relationship between the length of the second finger to the fourth finger ratio and increased anger with sexual jealousy ([Fussell et al., 2011](#)). The second digit to fourth digit ratio correlates with prenatal testosterone levels such that men or women with ring fingers longer than their index fingers were exposed to higher testosterone levels. Those with a more masculinized brain will likely experience more significant distress in response to a partner's sexual infidelity ([Buss, 2006](#)). A masculinized brain is not limited to men; it can be found in women whose mothers had congenital adrenal hyperplasia (CAH) or who were exposed to higher levels of androgens in utero (e.g., [Fleming et al. 2017](#)). And women born to mothers with CAH tend to display more traditional male behaviors like aggression and jealousy ([Abrams, 2016](#)).

Infidelity as the Norm—Prevalence and Incidence

Infidelity is common and even allowing for people's aversion to acknowledging it in surveys ([Whisman & Snyder, 2007](#)), it still is disclosed at high rates. In a recent survey study of sexual preferences, I queried 549 participants about whether they had ever cheated in a relationship. The results showed that 28.7% of men and 24.3% of women acknowledged having done so. This infidelity estimate is concordant with data compiled from the General Social Survey conducted six times over 16 years ([Schmitt, 2014](#)), which reported that between 22% and 25% of men admitted infidelity. With women, this percentage was somewhat lower, ranging between 10% and 18% in these earlier surveys.

Animals who mate for life, such as birds, offer unique insight into short- and long-term mating benefits. Both birds of a mated pair increase their fitness because they can provide superior protection and nutrition for their hatchlings when working together. However, both sexes also benefit from extrapair copulations, although for different reasons. EPCs are beneficial for the male as he can procreate with more females, which increases the chance of his genes being transmitted to future generations. Females benefit from EPCs by acquiring genes from a male more genetically fit than her mate. Female birds have evolved the ability to discern the correlates of good genes in males. Male birds evolved cues to their genetic endowments like the extravagant plumage of the peacock ([Loyau et al., 2005](#)), or the maintenance of coveted territory by the bowerbird ([Pruett-Jones & Pruett-Jones, 1994](#)), or displays of fighting ability by the cowbird ([O'Loghlen & Rothstein, 2012](#)). Physically attractive attributes can be as important to humans as they are to other animals. Humans prefer symmetrical faces absent of lesions or other indicators of immune deficiency. They prefer a body structure that reveals sex-typical hormone levels. This is exemplified by a male preference for women with more gluteofemoral fat—especially when that fat results in hips about a third wider than the waist. For women's preferences, broad shoulders, lower body fat, and greater height are desirable. In addition to the importance of physical attributes, humans' choice of mates is more complex, with state of mind and intent being a factor, and many non-physical features being considered. The markers of attractiveness vary in importance based on an individual's circumstances and intent. For

all male apes use some mechanism to compete with other males to maximize their genetic fitness.

In humans, alertness to potential alternate partners increases as the passion in a long-term relationship declines. Intimately bonded people increasingly become aware of the flaws and blemishes of their partners that they did not discern in the earlier phases of the relationship. Each will become exasperated by aspects of their lover's personality that they once found unremarkable or even charming and engaging. One reason is that emotional states guide the ancient brain circuits that alter perception. Sexual arousal can undermine many limbic survival defenses in favor of facilitating genetic survival. Even fundamental visceral responses like disgust are attenuated when one is sexually attracted to another person ([Stevenson et al., 2011](#)). For example, think about your typical reaction to noticing a bolus of saliva on the rim of a cup offered by a casual friend—you would quickly reject it with a grimace. Now think of the times you were sexually aroused and eagerly imbibed the saliva of your paramour—in the act often called French kissing. Many people, when sexually excited, will orally stimulate portions of their lover's body immediately proximate to the wellsprings of body wastes. The perceptual changes affected by sexual arousal diminish moral revulsion as much as visceral disgust. Passion will make the antisocial miscreant seem empathic and loving when someone is strongly attracted to them.

Since a central function of the brain is the continuous creation of a working model of the world, the unfaithful partner will construct explanations to justify their behavior to themselves ([Seth, 2013](#); [Böhm & Pfister, 2015](#)). These explanations usually include an adverse evaluation of their current relationship that absolves them from guilt about pursuing new mates. They can also include revisionist premises that one's partner was never appropriate, that the exiting partner never felt loved, or the relationship was always unfulfilling. However, clinical experience strongly indicates that these perceptions and assessments are post hoc in response to a recent decline in attraction to a current mate along with the perceived availability of a more desirable partner. The combination of these factors leads to one of several exit schemes to conveniently leave the relationship. The selected one is often contingent on the exiting partner's risk aversion, level of dissatisfaction, and emotional dependency on the relationship ([Conroy-Beam et al., 2015](#); [Gangestad & Simpson, 2000](#); [Schmitt & Buss, 2001](#)). It seems that marital dissatisfaction is a greater

impetus for the affairs of women than of men. This effect was supported by a classic study ([Glass, 1985](#)) that found that 56% of men, but only 34% of women involved in affairs reported that their marriages were happy.

The decision to have an affair is based on several factors, foremost of which are conflict in the relationship, or changes in a partner's appearance or status that makes them less desirable. If one or both of these are combined with the availability of a desirable alternative, the risk precipitously increases. And these factors come about quite often as the degradation of romantic bonds is nearly inevitable. Even in the most passionate connections, it tends to degrade, as it is an adaptation that evolution seems to have given a short life ([Fisher, 1994](#)). Of course, it can evolve into a companionate love that may create an even stronger bond than that engendered by romance ([Epstein et al., 2013](#)). However, the high rate of divorce or relationship dissolution suggests that this progression is less common than one would hope for.

The social barriers to fidelity give way to the adaptations that drive people to extradyadic relationships more in some than in others. Infidelity as an adaption is supported by the connection between highly heritable personality traits (e.g., [Abrams, 2020](#)) and cheating. For example, low conscientiousness and high openness to experience predict infidelity in women, and low agreeableness predicts infidelity in men ([Botwin et al., 1997](#)). Moreover, high agreeableness correlates with greater relationship satisfaction along with more guilt after infidelity (and presumably less mate switching) ([Apostolou & Panayiotou, 2019](#)). Of the many possible personality correlates of infidelity, the most intuitive is narcissism. In a longitudinal study of married couples, narcissism was related to infidelity, even after controlling for marital and sexual satisfaction ([McNulty & Widman, 2014](#)). The fact that many personality traits are linked to infidelity is particularly relevant, as personality is an evolved and fitness-enhancing aspect of the psyche ([Ellis & Abrams, 2008](#)). If all personality measures are heritable and many significantly correlated with infidelity, it follows that infidelity is also likely to be heritable and adaptive. And this is precisely what a study of 7,378 twin pairs revealed. Specifically, extrarelationship sex among these twins was demonstrated to have a heritability of 62% in men and 40% in women (Zietsch et al., 2015). The higher heritability of infidelity in men is concordant with the larger fitness benefits infidelity provides

immune competence, and a masculine scent offering a desirable genetic profile (Jacob et al. 2002), the decline in romantic love is more likely to be survived. Similarly, if the woman has many of the markers of reproductive health that we associate with beauty, such as a .7 waist-to-hip ratio, symmetrical body fat, and a neotenous face, in that case, the relationship is more likely to successfully transition into a new stable bond. However, if the diminution of love awakens a partner to deficiencies in their mate, a typical response is to reevaluate the relationship. And if this reassessment process leads to the tacit or overt conclusion that one could do better, or be happier with someone new, the process of mate switching often begins.

Infidelity as an Exit Strategy

Infidelity is an ineluctable aspect of sexuality and is ensconced in the human behavioral repertoire. Despite the just-world perspective, sexual infidelity is an anomalous deviation from the norm; it is an essential, even adaptive aspect of sexual reproduction. Some of the evolved motivations for infidelity—attempts to increase one's fecundity and produce offspring with better genes—were described above. However, it seems that infidelity, in humans and animals, has a strategic, if unkind, function as a means to exit a committed relationship. It is difficult for most people to leave a person with whom they have shared a substantial portion of their lives, have procreated with, have loved. People develop affinities and attachment to people or even places by mere exposure (e.g., [Zajonc, 1980](#)). The stronger the attachment to a person, the greater the distress in leaving them. This can be the case even if the person is unloved—even if hated (e.g., [Dutton & Painter, 1993](#)).

Leaving a significant other, even if the original bonds have morphed from love to aversion, commonly leads to intense feelings of loss, anxiety, or depression. These aversive reactions to separation seem to be innate. They have a substantial heritability, and those with the most severe reactions to partner loss have measurable differences in their amygdala ([Abrams, 2020](#); [Redlich et al., 2014](#)). Particularly intense adverse reactions to the loss of a partner often result when the loss is believed to be the result of infidelity ([Shackelford et al., 2004](#), p. 284). Relationships that end after infidelity are often preceded by periods of suspicious conflict and accusations. Suspicions may be potentiated by

take the risk of leaving a committed partner. Also, her positive reaction to his looks, terms of endearment, etc., will indicate that she is not fully committed to her current relationship. Having assessed the potential new mate as having a viable interest in her, she will then evaluate a second criterion, rating the value of the new suitor relative to her current paramour. This rating typically includes evaluating attributes like social or financial status, health, and attractiveness. The third selection criterion for women assessing potential new mates is eligibility: a man who is, or least appears to be, free of encumbrances such as children, a solid bond to another woman, or other social obligations that would impede his availability.

Women who are particularly vigilant for new mates, especially those with a higher willingness to engage in extramarital couplings, are those who have come to perceive their current mate as unattractive ([Pillsworth & Haselton, 2006](#)). If a woman accurately judges herself to be of a higher value than her current partner, mate switching is deemed to be potentially beneficial. However, this judgment is not a consequence of a sudden epiphany, in either men or women. In most cases, it is the product of a gradual change in perspective that may or may not result from objective changes in mate value. Such an attitudinal change can occur when one partner becomes less attractive relative to their mate due to differential aging. Or, one mate achieves social, educational, or professional status that radically elevates them close to their partner. As the self-assessed value in the ascendant partner increases, they will frequently experience an increasing dissonance between their self-assessed value and their commitment to the relationship (e.g., [Schmitt & Buss, 2001](#)). This dissonance arises as a slow and insidious process that leads the disaffected partner to attribute their dissatisfaction to their partner's shortcomings ([Abrams, 2012](#)). This process not only makes infidelity more likely, but it also allows the unfaithful partner to feel justified in being unfaithful. Having decided that their diminished attraction to their partner results from the partner's own failures, they are unlikely to feel remorse about their infidelity. The infidelity will lead to increased devaluation of their partner, who will increasingly be viewed as inferior to the new lover. The progressive devaluation of one's partner leads to a closer bond to the new lover, which increases the chance of infidelity being a gateway to mate switching.

Just as some people rate themselves as more desirable or marketable than their partner, others labor through life feeling that they are unworthy of their partner. This perspective becomes problematic if it becomes evident to their partner. If one conveys that one feels unworthy of the partner, it is not improbable they will inadvertently convince a partner that this is the case. Paradoxically, the solicitations and amenities the self-effacing partner offers to secure the esteem of their lover may have the undesired effect of having the solicited partner reevaluate the equity of the relationship. Such a reevaluation can destabilize a relationship and increase vulnerability to mate poaching and subsequent infidelity ([Schmitt, & Buss, 2001](#); [Arnocky et al., 2013](#)). Thus, the efforts of the self-effacing paramour to secure their lover might paradoxically lead to their becoming amenable to accepting the advances of a suitor.

Sexual infidelity in relationships in which a partner perceives their mate to have less value may be explained by the “good genes hypothesis.” In this case, women have evolved a dual mating strategy—obtaining parental and other investment from one man while surreptitiously seeking and mating with those they find more sexually attractive. A woman being drawn to a man who is more sexually attractive represents her nonconscious quest for “better” genes. Indeed, the willingness of many women to risk the consequences of an affair denotes the compelling attraction to someone with a superior genome. The quest for better genes is more motivation for women than for men, who, unlike women, will often have affairs even when satisfied with their current relationship. Studies ([Shackelford & Buss 1997b](#)) have shown that most men who cheat report that they are happy with their long-term partners. Their motives are the quest for novelty and opportunity to propagate their genes (consciously or unconsciously).

The tendency for partners in relationships to reevaluate their own and their partner's worth likely underlies the high divorce and dissatisfaction rate in marriages ([Abrams, 2016](#)). In addition, the high frequency of divorce and the instability of courting relationships leads to both mate guarding and efforts to evade a partner's mate guarding. This leads to implicit competition in relationships that increase the chances of seeking more desirable mates. Additionally, mates who are vigilant for potential new partners will be more likely to convey availability to those who practice mate poaching ([Schmitt & Buss, 2001](#)). This practice usually involves detecting unstable or conflictual relationships and

exploiting their vulnerability by courting one with overt or implicit promises of offering more relationship equity than their current relationship can provide. The offers of the mate poacher will be compelling to the individual who is desirous of a higher-value mate and perceives their current relationship to be unsatisfactory.

Understanding mate switching, mate poaching, the substrates of infidelity, and related complexities of love and sex is essential for researchers and clinicians examining couples with sexual and physical intimacy problems. Too often, sexual problems are viewed as primarily cultural or learned. In fact, most aspects of love and bonding indicate that they are biological processes. Of course, their specific expressions are culturally defined, but their essential functions are evolved to optimize procreation. Even romantic love, an idealized aspect of human mating, is a genetic and biological phenomenon that evolved to create a bond enduring enough to mate and rear a child ([Fisher, 2005](#)). Research has demonstrated that the passionate emotions of romantic love may be more than a result of programmed activation of brain reward centers ([Aron et al., 2005](#)). Despite its cross-cultural idealization, romantic love is explained by innate neuropsychological systems. The evolutionary and biological nature of romantic love is exemplified by the tendency to fall in love with people who have sufficiently similar major histocompatibility complexes ([Garver-Apgar, 2006](#)). The fact that genetic compatibility, such as having similar major histocompatibility complex genes underlies attraction and romance strongly supports the biological nature of love. And just as love is innate, so too are many of the impulses that disrupt it. This does not mean that we are destined to fall in love with people with the right genes just long enough to procreate, but it does mean that people require conscious effort to sustain relationships.

Case Studies

To this point, this chapter has reviewed many of the theories about infidelity as a route to mate-switching. Clinical experience provides little doubt that it does occur often. Below are two typical cases of the many couples with whom I have worked who have experienced infidelity. The cases are accurate descriptions of clients. They have been altered to protect the individuals' confidentiality without detracting from the

essential elements of biographies that are archetypal of people who have lived through this phenomenon.

Case One: A Man Seeking Younger Mates

The following is based on a client typical of many male clients with whom I have worked. Although disguised for confidentiality, it captures the motivation, attitudes, and actions of a man who used infidelity to find a new mate.

Tyler worked hard at looking fit and youthful in his early 50s. He was above average in height and had an athletic build that was not typical of men his age. The fact that he had acquired substantial savings and a high-status position made his evident efforts into optimizing his appearance even more notable. Tyler was the mayor of a wealthy suburban city in a northeastern state and a practicing attorney in the same town. This was legal and acceptable in his state, and Tyler's law practice benefited from clients who eagerly sought out a respected political figure as their lawyer. He decided to seek guidance from a psychologist sufficiently far from him to minimize any chances of being seen by his constituents or clients. He said he needed an objective opinion on his next steps in a significant life change. It was not his upcoming congressional race or his practice moving into a larger office that troubled him. Instead, it was finding a means to exit his marriage that would cause the least pain for his wife and three adolescent and young teen children. Tyler confided that younger women had always found him attractive and have continually tempted him. He admitted that he had succumbed to temptation at least three times. His sexual affairs lasted from a few months to two years. These entanglements were with women substantially younger than himself. His lovers were women who had been employees of either the city he governed or the law firm he managed. He noted that he had mutually agreeable separations from the first two. However, one of the two did clarify that she would feel uncomfortable continuing with his firm and would need help getting a fresh start elsewhere. Tyler had helped her get this start with \$50,000 and a recommendation that led to a more remunerative job in a nearby state. He emphasized that these payments were purely out of love and generosity.

The third affair was the one that was the most problematic. Tyler poignantly described his great love for this young woman who was

more than two decades younger than him. He enthusiastically described her as precociously prudent and intelligent. She was his confidant, his best friend, and she inspired more passion than he had felt for any woman. The passion he felt for Anna had led him to realize that he had never truly loved his wife, Kelly. He complained that he married her to satisfy his parents, who repeatedly assured him that he loved her and that she was “perfect for him.” Now 24 years later, he claimed that the love he professed to her, and even his marriage proposal, were no more than his echoing his parents’ assertions and yielding to their tacit demands. When asked if he thought his wife loved him, he stated that she probably did, “in her own way.” But it wasn’t “real love,” just a love of “convenience.” When asked if she ever said anything specific to validate his perception, he said she didn’t, but she didn’t have to as her life was centered around the home and her children. To avoid potential image problems, Tyler had arranged for his paramour Anna to get a new position in another locale. He made it clear that it was the first step in a plan to extricate himself from his unfulfilling marriage. He planned to wait at least a year after Anna no longer worked for him before moving in with her and asking for a divorce.

In subsequent meetings, Tyler could not detail any aspect of his marriage that jibed with his characterizations of an unhappy union originating out of pressure. They had traveled and celebrated together, planned their children, and had been affectionate for most of their relationship. Any estrangement on the part of his wife seemed to be a response to Tyler’s growing emotional distance. Sex had become virtually nonexistent between Tyler and Kelly. He attributed it to her unwillingness to work at making herself more attractive for him. Despite his claims that it was Kelly’s indifference to her appearance that led to their sexual estrangement, his declining interest seemed to be more correlated with her age and role as a mother, as well as his extramarital relationships with much younger women.

Rather than encourage Kelly to work on her appearance and emotional expressiveness, Tyler distanced himself from her with his love affairs and general indifference. Kelly probably suspected Tyler had lost his passion, but she did not even imagine that he was having an affair with an implicit goal of finding a new partner. She found out after Easter dinner with Tyler and their children at her parents’ house. He accurately guessed that she would hide her hurt and humiliation when he

told her he wanted a divorce. This saved him the distress of seeing her suffer from his rejection and betrayal. Kelly doubtlessly suffered the worst day of her life, but she maintained a heroically stoic demeanor to save her parents and children from distress. Tyler said he was proud of her. Within a few weeks and some family counseling sessions to help his children adjust to the separation, Tyler moved into a luxury condominium a few miles away. Anna moved in shortly after that. But Anna and Tyler's plan was not carried out to Anna's satisfaction. She was assured that after a "cooling off" period, they would get married and have a family of their own. Yet, for many months after moving in with Anna, Tyler not only evaded any discussions of marriage but seemed to have a waning interest in the relationship. The relationship deteriorated in a series of arguments and complaints. As Anna increased her demands for marriage and children, Tyler responded with complaints about Anna's personality. These were typically red herring diversions from the main issue that he had broken his commitment to Anna and did not seem to have any intentions to marry or have children with her. Tyler even told Anna he was doubtful of her trustworthiness as she had an affair with a married man— himself.

At Anna's insistence, Tyler agreed to couples counseling. He chose this author, probably believing that a psychologist he had previously seen would be biased in his favor. During the first session, Tyler proclaimed his love and commitment to Anna but said he could no longer bear Anna's complaints and nagging. Anna was distraught throughout the session, and Tyler used her frustrated grief as evidence of her irrationality and his victimization. This would be the theme for the subsequent few sessions. Despite the best efforts of the counselor, the plan that Tyler had set for the counseling could not be derailed. After three sessions, Anna refused to continue, stating that it was pointless and frustrating. Tyler made it clear to Anna that he felt she had given up trying, which made him confident that he had the moral standing to begin seeing other women. Although he made a minimal effort to hide his connections, Anna would find messages on his social media and dating sites, making it clear that he was active in other romantic pursuits. She had sought help from the counselor whom she had seen for couples counseling. The counselor made it clear that Tyler was following a pattern that was unlikely to change. Despite the counselor's warnings, she persisted in her efforts to make Tyler love her again. To her numerous sexual

overtures and acts of affection, Tyler responded with indifference or even hostility. He would seemingly wait for Anna to make any mistake or omission to point out her deficiencies. This pattern continued for approximately two months until Anna had no choice but to leave.

In a relatively brief period, Tyler was unfaithful at least twice and switched two mates. His professed love for Anna facilitated Tyler's ability to leave his wife and children. However, once convinced of his ready access to younger women, Anna had lost her appeal. Like many men who have affairs with an implicit or explicit goal of finding a new partner, Tyler was not satisfied with the partner that eased his exit from the relationship.

Case Two:—An Unfaithful Woman in Quest of a More Fit Partner

Karen was a teacher specializing in children with special needs. She was 32 and, being aware of the duration of her fertility, had a growing sense of urgency about finding a life partner. She wanted to have children and was becoming increasingly proactive about finding an appropriate husband. Karen knew that her archetypal lover—the tall, blonde, Norse god type—was not likely to come anytime soon. So, she established that she would be open to a nice man who was reasonably handsome and financially secure. Shortly after she decided on this compromise, a new vice-principal was hired. He was not tall and blonde; he was of average height and appeared Mediterranean in origin. However, he was well educated, articulate, and, as Karen would later discover, relatively well off. Val was both frugal and the only heir to his parent's estate. These attributes were sufficient for Karen to forgive him for not possessing the physical qualities of her dream man. She reasoned that his superior intellect, educational, and professional accomplishments made him a much more viable breeding stock than the Vikings that she found sexually compelling. Karen made her final decision that he would make the best partner for a husband and father of her children. Afterward, Karen began doing everything that dignity and decorum would permit to let Val know that she was interested in him. Her efforts paid off when Val approached her in the teacher's cafeteria, told her that he had two tickets to a concert, and she was welcome to the extra one. It was an awkward way to ask her out, but she gracefully accepted the ticket and the offer to accompany him to the concert. This event marked the begin-

ning of a brief courtship that culminated with Karen and Val moving in together, renting a house in an upscale neighborhood a short drive from their school. A year later, Karen was pregnant, and they were married three months into the pregnancy. Karen wanted children, and if she was going to marry a man other than her Norse god, she wanted to be sure that he was equipped to fulfill this critical goal before marrying him.

Things were going well after the birth of their son and seemed to be getting better when a former classmate of Val offered him an executive position in a well-funded start-up that provided educational programs to school systems. This seemed to be an excellent opportunity as the company was highly rated and quickly expanding. It had innovated AI systems to augment learning for every student level. Val would have to quit his tenured teaching job, but this seemed a small cost for a job that more than doubled his salary. He gave notice, and within a month, he managed sales for the tech start-up. Karen was happy to be expecting their second child, and their relationship was flawless. Things even improved from good to better with Val's new salary that allowed for household amenities and weekend getaways. Then six months into his new job, Val was informed that the company was being audited by one of the venture capital firms that funded the company. He initially was unconcerned, thinking it was a formality. However, the sudden increase in meetings and the persistent concern exhibited by senior staff told Val something ominous was happening. He was right. The CEO and the CFO were fired, and the rest of the senior staff were told that there would be more changes and cuts. As best as Val could determine, his company's product was not as original as he was told. Besides, sales had not been growing as reported. In short, the company was on its way to dissolution, and Val was on his way to unemployment.

Had Val left for another school administrator position, he might have been able to find a new job relatively quickly. However, as a senior staff member of a company that was still under investigation, he found his job market quite limited. He ended taking a position as a permanent substitute teacher in a low-SES school district. The pay was a small fraction of what he had been getting, and his status and self-esteem plummeted. His self-rebuke worsened when Karen took a second job at a test preparation company. She had to work two jobs to offset his salary reduction, making him feel worthless—a feeling that was evident to almost anyone who observed him. In his despair, Val made the common mistake of

seeking reassurance from a spouse going through an emotional crisis of her own. Karen's priorities were her child and child to be, and their life quality now seemed at risk. Her anxieties were leading her to question the trajectory of their marriage. Val's new self-effacing demeanor and his apologetic efforts to do more at home had the paradoxical effect of diminishing his status in Karen's eyes. She now pitied him, and pity is not attractive. As this tension in their marriage increased, their sexual encounters radically decreased in frequency.

At this point in their relationship, Karen went on maternity leave after the birth of their daughter. What would have been a celebratory time was one of distress as Karen lost the income from her second job, and now they also had the increased expenses of a second child. These additional financial pressures increased Karen's resentment toward Val. He could little more than apologize and promise a better future. Over the coming months, their debt kept growing, and their relationship continued deteriorating. Fortunately, Karen and Val found some salvation in Val's college friend Bert. For many years he had been a casual friend of Val. But during this dark period, he began to stop by more often, offering moral support and sometimes bringing small gifts. Bert's upbeat demeanor was a happy offset to Val's open anguish. He then did more than offer cheer; he offered the couple a substantial loan that would not need to be repaid until Val got a good job. Karen was effusive and quickly accepted with a hug while Val responded coldly; he would later complain that he was not adequately consulted about the loan. Over several months, Bert would make two more loans which would substantially improve Val and Karen's financial situation. This generosity further endeared him to Karen while increasing Val's envy. Bert was never reticent about the details of his successes and his financial security. He would frame this information in the form of assurances to Val and Karen that his loans had no adverse impact on his financial situation.

With his debt to Bert, Val could not express his discomfort about Bert's frequent visits—very often when Karen was home alone. It took several of these visits before Val asserted his frustration; his damaged self-esteem and debt to Bert had kept him silent. He angrily told Karen that he didn't want Bert coming to their home when he wasn't home. She responded by calling him jealous and childish. The more he insisted, the lower her blows would fall. She called him a failure and a loser. She had won. Val had given up and stopped asking her to stop. And he wouldn't

ask Bert as he felt too ashamed of his jealousy of a friend who had been helping him.

Bert's visits abruptly stopped after a couple of months. Paradoxically, this did not provide a great deal of relief to Val, as Bert's disappearance was accompanied by a resurgence of Karen's interest in Val. She was suddenly affectionate and sexual again. These changes only piqued Val's suspiciousness and jealousy, as the confluence of these two life changes seemed too coincidental. Val increased his questioning of Karen, telling her that he knew what had been going on—a gambit that worked. Karen confessed that Bert had been poaching on their relationship. He had become a reassuring confidant who offered Karen guidance and suggestions on improving her life. These suggestions increasingly included a future with him. On reflection, Karen realized that Bert never promised to marry her if she left Val—but it was strongly implied. She acknowledged her frustration with Val's professional failures had made Bert seem more exciting and attractive.

Bert and Karen had an affair that lasted six months but ended when Karen moved to divorce Val. She was shocked and disappointed when Bert encouraged her to take her time. Karen began to press Bert about their future, and he soon made it clear that much as he was fond of her, he would not take on the responsibility of marriage—especially to a woman with two children. She was enraged and broke off the relationship, something that Bert seemed amenable to. Bert was a mate poacher, and Karen had an affair with him with at least a nonconscious goal of obtaining a more fit partner. When this failed, she sought to reconcile with Val. She suggested that they attend the couple's counseling. Val said that he had only agreed for the sake of their children.

At last contact, Val was still angry and suspicious of Karen, but they collaborated in parenting and reestablishing their finances. Val did get a new tenured teaching position, and he did pay Bert everything that was owed. They are no longer friends.

Assessing Couples Experiencing Infidelity

People have extrarelationship sex for many reasons, but the modal reason is quite apparent: The desire and pleasure of sex are often more compelling than the deterrents of guilt or remorse. Unfortunately for many marriages and other unions, the emotions that can discourage

cheating usually fade to insignificance in the face of the nonconscious evolutionary modules that can make infidelity feel right or justified. This phenomenon is best understood in light of other sexual activities that are condemned by many cultures. People who have gay, lesbian, bisexual, or even paraphilic sexualities tend to feel the sex is healthy and appropriate, even in societies that condemn nonnormative sexualities ([Abrams, 2016](#)). The ability to accept and identify with one's sexual behavior despite social rebuke directly results from sexuality being an innate and largely immutable aspect of one's identity. Comparably, the innate modules that lead to mate switching are very likely innate adaptations that will overcome society proscriptions and personal commitments. This includes the near universal vigilance for new and more desirable partners, the tendency for romantic love to weaken, and the inclination to use extrarelationship sex to find a new partner.

Thus, a clinical assessment of a sexually estranged couple requires that a counselor have a working knowledge of evolutionary psychology and conceptualize a couple's conflicts in terms of evolved psychological mechanisms. The assessment needs to include apprising both partners of the evolutionary motives that underlie the desire for extradyadic sex. The assessment also must include elicitation of the unfaithful partner's overt explanations for their actions. It also must involve evaluating the level of hurt and betrayal being experienced by the betrayed partner. The application of evolutionary psychology to the counseling process must include educating clients about the evolution of the nonconscious motives and drives that lead to changing desires and emotions. Clients need to be given a working knowledge of the evolutionary foundations of love and mating to help them accurately understand the trajectory that their relationship has taken. An evolutionarily informed clinician working with estranged couples needs to evaluate both the factors that led to one of the partners seeking sexual or emotional satisfaction from another and the potential for both to reestablish a stable bond. The partners need to be educated on the true nature of nonconscious motivational forces that underlie so many of the actions and feelings that underlie love, sex, and bonding. The knowledge that one's partner has been motivated by an ancient and evolved propensity to seek new partners will not engender immediate forgiveness. But it will help both partners understand the significance of the evolved love and sex proclivities that help motivate the infidelity. It will enable the couple to accept that a restoration of the

relationship will require a substantial change to each of their views of intimacy and require a new look at each other.

The assessment needs to determine whether both partners are genuinely open to developing a new understanding of their relationship. Both partners will be re-engaging in a relationship in which one will be aggrieved for some time, and the other will be a risk for future infidelity. If it is clear that both are fully committed to overcoming such significant obstacles, the assessment can continue to help both partners understand the trajectory of their troubled relationship. This should include identifying what external factors led one partner to seek a new mate. Some of the antecedents of the infidelity as a means to a new partner include:

- Diminished attraction on the part of one or both partners.
- Persistent anger at actions or attitudes of a partner.
- A reduction in status, perceived appearance, or life functioning of one of the partners.
- Personality disorders or clinical conditions on either side that became apparent as romantic feelings began to fade.

When a change has taken place in a partner's feelings, the counselor must assist each partner in understanding and accepting it. Such changes can include loss of sexual attraction, the development of hostile feelings, or affections for a third party. When such a change leads to infidelity, the counselor must insist that the transgressed partner explores the beliefs and values that underlie their anger or vindictiveness. Specifically, they need to make explicit their tacit demands and other irrational beliefs. The offended partner needs to be assisted to see that vengeance and rage are not compatible with either leaving or restoring the relationship. This help must be in the form of a dialogue where the thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes that underlie the angry intentions are elicited. Similarly, the irrational demands and values that led the unfaithful partner to stray also must be detailed and examined.

Counseling Couples Facing Infidelity

The goal of finding a new mate through having an affair sometimes is not reached, and the unfaithful partner stays with the original mate. They end up back with an aggrieved spouse or paramour. Some couples will seek help in restoring their relationship after infidelity. As with

all couples' therapy, treatment for a couple with an unfaithful partner should begin with an individual session with each partner to assess each partner's feelings and view of the situation and their goals for the therapy sessions. One or both members of the dyad will often use couples' therapy as an exit strategy. Even if there is no sincere desire to remain together, it is painful to leave a relationship for reasons that include guilt, inertia, social responsibility, or feelings of obligation. The counselor is placed in a no-win situation in which the partner who secretly desires a way out is not trying to reconcile but only wants to claim that he or she has tried everything to make the relationship work. Worse, the counselor's interventions can be blamed for pulling the relationship asunder. A requisite of doing couple counseling is being thick-skinned, but the job does not include billing for wasted time. Thus, the counselor must determine whether both partners are committed to continuing the relationship. This may not be immediately obvious. As the research previously presented shows, a great deal of sexual motivation is innate, evolutionarily old, and not always consciously accessible to the individual.

When and if a change has taken place and becomes evident in counseling, the counselor must assist each partner in understanding and accepting this. Changes in a relationship can include loss of sexual passion, the development of anger or resentment, or introducing a third party. When a change such as a reduction in allure leads to infidelity, the counselor must insist that the offended partner understand his or her hurt, anger, and vengefulness in terms of his or her demands and other irrational beliefs. The offended partner must be helped to see that retribution and rage are not compatible with restoring the relationship. This is accomplished by enabling the partners to discover and challenge their irrational beliefs and tacit demands collaboratively.

Similarly, any beliefs or demands that led the unfaithful partner to stray must be identified. The unfaithful partner must be helped to accept that they were guided by irrational, demanding, or rigid thinking that encouraged them to violate their values. They then have to commit to replacing their beliefs with ones that will promote commitment and stability. Ultimately, both partners must be helped to see that creating a new relationship without the ruminations about the past is the best path to resolution. If both can view the infidelity as bad but not terrible or unredeemable, it can eventually become no more relevant than the sexual encounters before the relationship.

Clinical Approaches to Infidelity

Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) has become the de facto gold standard of psychotherapy modalities ([David et al., 2018](#)). The sine qua non of this approach is identifying and changing beliefs, personal philosophies, and attitudes that lead to dysfunctional emotions or behaviors. Since the foundation of many cognitive processes is evolutionarily endowed modules of mind, clinicians need to take a new look at the motivation of the many behaviors and emotions that underlie relationship conflicts like infidelity. While a long-term, monogamous relationship is a goal for many, it has only recently become the ideal, and not in all societies. According to the research, we often vastly overestimate the importance of romantic love and mutual attraction and desire that last forever, as they diminish over time, and only a small number of relationships “survive” these changes. While none of this justifies adultery, it offers another outlook on it and can help both therapist and client understand the infidelity ([Abrams, 2016](#)).

Once the counselor understands the motivations of the infidelity and whether the unfaithful partner is earnest about his or her commitment to reestablishing the relationship, the counselor should enlighten the client about significant factors that underlie much of human behavior. Clients need to be informed that a preponderance of human behavior—especially those relating to love and sex—is guided by heritable and evolved mechanisms. This explanation should emphasize that heritability does not inevitably determine human thinking and acting. Still, it will increase the probability of many problematic behaviors such as infidelity and the activities that precede it. With this information, the client can more effectively understand the undesirable actions of their mate and their impulses.

In a relationship in which a partner is progressing from an affair to leaving a relationship, both parties must explore the beliefs and emotions that led them or their partner to seek someone else. The counselor should be aware that a sincere desire to be faithful does not erase the inclinations in the person or deficits in a relationship that led to the infidelity. Once clients are briefed on the evolutionary nature of love and sex, they can be educated on how their innate inclinations usually take the form of distorted perceptions and irrational beliefs about their own

or their partner's behavior. Below are some of the common distorted or irrational beliefs that both cause and exacerbate the distress associated with infidelity—especially infidelity as a path to a new partner.

Distorted Cognitions Associated With Infidelity

Common beliefs of the betrayed partner include:

- “I have been completely humiliated and must shame him/her to restore my self-respect.”
- “My mate is completely worthless, and I must punish them.”
- “I can never trust any partner again.”
- “I must punish the cheater by fighting for custody or refusing to end the relationship.”
- “It is absolutely unbearable that people will know that my partner cheated.”
- “I am a worthless lover, and no one will ever want me.”
- “The infidelity permanently tainted me, and I cannot be with this person.”
- “They deceived me, and so everything they ever said to me must have been a lie.

Common beliefs on the part of the unfaithful partner include:

- “I have an absolute right to pursue my gratification elsewhere if my spouse/partner doesn't meet my needs.”
- “It is completely his/her fault that they have become unattractive to me. They forced me to find someone else.”
- “My lover completely understands me and loves me far more than they did, so I am justified.”
- “They are no longer the person I fell in love with, so I had no choice but to find someone like they used to be.”
- “My partner absolutely should understand that I had to do this.”

Even though these irrational and demanding beliefs are likely to arise due to innate inclinations, they can be modified by CBT. After each irrational belief is identified through therapeutic discussion, they can be illuminated and modified using one of the many disputation techniques. Each member of the couple has to be helped to see that their alienation

from their partner is partially a result of their change in the perception of the other. This is especially important for the unfaithful partner who blames their partner's shortcomings for their unfaithfulness and the aggrieved partner who blames the infidelity for all their negative feelings. An essential initial step is to encourage each partner to specify specific changes they have identified in their partner that are currently troubling them. They then have to explore the specific transformations required of both of them to have a satisfactory new relationship.

The clinician should remain vigilant for signs that one or both partners have made therapeutic efforts futile. A significant percentage of those suffering infidelity will never forgive the offense ([Shackelford et al., 2002](#)), and a substantial number of the unfaithful will be recidivists. If it seems that infidelity represents an unforgivable transgression or that the straying partner is still intent on finding a new mate, then the couple needs to be counseled accordingly. It is crucial to convey realistic expectations. For example, the unfaithful partner needs to be warned that staying in the relationship may be associated with prolonged hostility and resentment even with counseling. And the aggrieved partner needs to be warned that the desire for some to switch mates is often a need that resurfaces. However, if both partners want to stay together, they are helped by accepting the rational idea that infidelity is painful but not disastrous ([Abrams, 2016](#)).

The ultimate goal of CBT for infidelity or mate switching is to help people identify and regulate the evolutionarily endowed impulses that lead them to behaviors that may feel adaptive but no longer are. Many of our evolved psychological mechanisms are at odds with the demands and standards of modern life ([Abrams, 2020](#)). Like our sexual desires, we have many innate appetites that motivate self-defeating behaviors that can lead to obesity, substance abuse, or the morbid use of salt or sugar. The cravings can lead to destructive lifestyles that were once highly adaptive. The cravings for fats, sugar, and salt were appropriate motivations when these necessary nutrients were in chronic short supply. Now, in Western societies, they are chronically overabundant, and these cravings shorten our lives. However, we can override these nonconscious mechanisms with ongoing conscious efforts.

The research into mating and love suggests that enduring relationships may require the same conscious efforts to override the impulses that lead to mate reappraisal, infidelity, and so on. The fact that arranged

marriages often endure longer than marriages based on romantic love (Abrams, 2016) is a hopeful sign. People in these marriages are paired based on their shared backgrounds and similar familial and economic support levels. Their bond tends to increase when they have worked together to overcome adversity, face life challenges, and share successes. Such marriages are structured such that innate tendencies are suppressed. However, the fact is that we do have these tendencies, and they will put relationships at risk unless they are recognized and managed. This can be accomplished by a CBT clinician who has practical knowledge of evolutionary psychology. This clinician can help couples in conflict understand the origins of their irrational and self-defeating beliefs or demands that are causing or exacerbating their contentions. Very often, it only takes a shift in perspective, an attenuation of extreme emotions, and some time to reconstruct perspectives to salvage a relationship.

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