

# **Four Reasons Behind Cheating and Affairs: When Intimacy Fails in a Relationship**

by Heather Carlile, MA, LPC, LPC-S

## **It Always Makes Sense**

When people come to me for marriage counseling, the troubling issues they describe are usually a result of some sort of problem they experienced in childhood or adolescence. In an effort to help the people who come to me for marriage or relationship counseling, I sought new and fast means to help them.

Now my clients tell me that, when I teach and mentor them, “it makes sense.” Their next thought is a question: “What do I do?” and the next step is deciding what to improve in their relationship.

As a marriage counselor, I’ve worked with hundreds of couples. Each relationship is unique and yet I can describe four general patterns that are at the root of most infidelity.

- 1. Lack of Maturity**
- 2. Lack of Emotional Intelligence**
- 3. Lack of Knowledge**
- 4. Lack of Skills**

## **1. Lack of Maturity**

**NEEDINESS: Adolescents, in the throes of Puppy Love, enjoy only the illusion of intimacy. These types are looking for relief. They dated and married too young in their adolescence and experience their unfulfilled teenage longing for fun and adventure. They are usually insensitive to their spouse’s or partner’s own plight or they have become a ‘love addict’ and haven’t been able to be emotionally individuated nor intimate. They are looking for the fun of a lost adolescence and, using the typical 14-year-old self-stimulation, they get by with “sex/drugs/rock n’ roll/virtual reality.” They have affairs to run away from responsibility too burdensome for their age and to get some relief from a job, a spouse and parenthood by seeking immature novelty and arousal.**

**Teenagers who fail to develop thinking skills lack perspective. Immature people will cheat even if they have empathy about the hurt they inflict. Planning for the future with decision-making ability, standards, beliefs and/or problem-solving knowledge come with developing identity in adolescence.**

**MATURITY OBTAINES BETRAYAL: The empowerment of self-mastery connects them with a sense of purpose. They make choices to reach goals and aren’t sidetracked by emotional neediness or committing to a marriage before they have identity and resources to offer a new spouse. This kind of maturity and relationship choice obviates betraying a beloved.**

**The Young Head-of-Household and The Young Hard-working Wife: Jason and Caitlin came to see me in agony. They had been through enough adversity for any couple in their 40s. But these two had started dating in high school, got married at 20 and now were still in their 20s and had three children. They did it all without help from their families because nobody supported their relationship so young. But they did it together and behaved like adults the whole time through jobs, college, parenting and running a household. They were tired in every way and they weren’t even thirty. They had never taken a vacation and worked most weekends. Caitlin had been seduced into a**

brief fling years before which they handled. But, now, Jason would go to a bar on his way home from work and would stay out all night sometimes. Although he tried to cover it up, Caitlin found out about the affair. She felt betrayed and violated. Jason honestly loved her and felt deeply ashamed but couldn't stop his impulses to get away. After working with me and understanding the losses they had incurred by skipping adolescence, they began to appreciate how hard it had been on both of them and, most of all, on their marriage. They started balancing their lifestyle by planning time for fun together and for time off so Jason didn't need to look for illicit pleasures. Their deep romantic friendship returned and grew as they re-established commitment, trust and open communication.

## 2. Lack of Emotional Intelligence

**POWER AND CONTROL: People compensate for under-developed emotional robustness by using defense mechanisms to achieve power and control over others. There are five major categories of being defensive or throwing tantrums with emotional victimhood: 1) The Depressed Pleaser, 2) The Whining Martyr, 3) The Pouting Withdrawer, 4) The Resentful Judge and 5) The Raging Dominator. And, there are two manipulative styles based on fear and control which create behaviors that are either too self-centered or too driven to please: 1) The User/Taker vs 2) The Pleaser/Giver.**

**These Users and Pleasers play Dominator or Doormat in order to avoid living with emotional intelligence. They haven't been taught how to handle and resolve hurts, guilt, grief, forgiveness and anger. They may have hardened the heart so that**

- (a.) sexual behavior is no longer connected with intimacy or**
- (b.) the libido can be re-activated only after there is no risk of attack and the wounds in the heart are healed.**

**The Suit and The Artist:** Jonathan was committed to providing for his wife and children. He was a bright executive and used to interacting with professionals at work in high-level problem solving. He valued intelligence, knowledge and solutions and he saw feelings as weak and useless. He was critical of Holly because she was too emotional for his taste and she seemed to be content to be a pleaser. She was invested in the roles of wife and mother and didn't engage in dialogue or conversations with him other than about parenting and running the household. He judged her as being less intelligent but a good mom. Holly was an artist and deeply sensitive. Her way of coping with Jonathan's disrespect and criticism was to withhold her thoughts and avoid interacting with him verbally and sexually. She turned to her girlfriends for friendship and understanding. Jonathan found himself stimulated by a social relationship with an outgoing and intelligent married woman. His fascination with her, despite his desire for fidelity to his wife, tipped his emotional affair into a sexual liaison. To his surprise, when Holly found out, she cared; she was very articulate and passionate. She felt abandoned, violated and angry. When they came for counseling, they weren't sure if they wanted to be married. Our work revealed Holly's intensity, intelligence and secret longing for emotional intimacy with Jonathan. She had been afraid of his rejection and hadn't been open and honest with him. She got a job in an advertising agency and felt more energized. She had more to share with her husband. Jonathan respected her actions and was willing to take Holly on dates and to engage in dialogue and conversation with her to see if they could find a peer friendship. As Holly opened up her thoughts and opinions, Jonathan opened his heart and soul. They surprised me with the courage and empathy in their new emotional and intimate bond. For the first time, they became romantic best friends.

### **3. Lack of Knowledge**

**IGNORANCE:** Reading even a couple of chapters of the many books which have good information on gender difference, communication, love languages and personality styles can make a difference.

**MENTORS:** But, my opinion is that seeing a marriage counselor is a fast-forward. When I can work privately with a couple, I can determine which elements of relationship abilities I need to teach first and make a difference in a couple of weeks. It saddens me when people feel a need to look for love away from the one closest to them and don't make an effort to look for solutions with experts.

**The Strong Leader and The Spunky Lady:** Ron and Kathy called me from Wisconsin. They had been married for 27 years; they were resentful and angry at each other and had no sex life. Ron had begun to get his needs for a romantic best friend through an emotional affair with an intelligent and extraverted woman at his workplace. He was rationalizing that elements of the personality quiz he and Kathy had taken showed that Kathy was so opposite to him that she couldn't love or understand him anymore. The truth was, they'd been growing apart for years and lost their sexual intimacy but, for logical reasons. Kathy was very angry that Ron dominated her and their children and disrespected her because she was more introverted and less active than he was. I agreed to counsel them; so they drove to Texas for a Marriage Intensive with me. After history and preps via 5 hours of phone sessions and working with them for 12 hours in my office, Kathy and Ron were smiling and holding hands. One thing they learned was that their differences actually complemented each other beautifully--provided they knew enough about treating each other with respect and handling their differences with kindness and good humor. Their last nights in Dallas while working with me were a lot more fun than they'd had in a decade. They wished they'd taken action sooner and asked if they could come back next year. I said, "I'm not going anywhere."

### **4. Lack of Skills**

**INEPT MEN:** Romance is a skill. Some cultures, North America among them, lack male role models and mentors who show guys the ropes in the arts of being a gentleman, a romantic, and a man who respects women and can court a lady. The female side to this deprivation of romance is just one feminine paradox.

**INEPT WOMEN:** A woman doesn't develop her flirtatiousness because of certain cultural attitudes. She learns either to repress her sexiness or to risk being labeled 'easy' or worse. A spouse often 'strays' because the woman has been disrespected by her man's ignorance about how to treat a lady in public, at home and in bed. A woman's libido naturally shuts down if she isn't feeling safe, understood, cared for and validated.

**JUST BUDDIES:** Her husband knows what he wants but doesn't value being a romantic and, therefore, doesn't know how to tend to her femininity and her sexual response. The wife may be disconnected with her body and her sexuality for various cultural judgements. And they may still be more comfortable with their friends as individuals rather than focusing on developing a new lifestyle as a couple with mutual fun with other couples rather than too much of him riding his motorcycle or her in her book club.

**The Attorney and The Damsel:** Courtney had given up hope that Chris would ever listen to her. He was an energetic attorney who thought he was being a generous husband when he built a lodge on the deer lease so she and the kids could come with him and his friends during hunting season. Until they were in my office and his outrage at her affair was sobered by my insistence, he had not yet heard any value in her complaints. She wanted affection, validation, friendship and not the increased work of additional housekeeping and cooking during what was supposed to be vacation. But her gentle complaints fell on deaf ears. One of the other dads in the country club had noticed she was always alone. He was a man of poetry and romance who made her feel like a gorgeous, lovable and sexy lady. She gave in to the pleasures of quiet romantic hours he offered when her husband was too busy to notice. When her husband, Chris, agreed to learn to spend time with her, talk with her, touch her, Courtney cut off the affair and was grateful that the man she really loved wanted all of her and wanted to learn to make her feel adored. It took Chris months to get over his feelings of being betrayed even though he understood that his wife's affair was due to his lack of romantic skills.

## It's a Matter of Growing Up

**INTIMACY LOST:** Romance before its time gives only the illusion of intimacy. I believe that our generation has unintentionally skipped the six steps of full empowerment and plunged into intimacy before we were prepared. Our parents and grandparents were not equipped to keep us on track to adulthood in the current environment. They couldn't have been ready. For example, our great inventors and visionaries couldn't foresee that a purely technical manual for our televisions, telephones, video games and computers couldn't inform us of how to use our technology with healthy wisdom and artfulness. Those of us who devote our professional lives to knowing people well are starting to have the research data which points out the value in choosing how to bring the media into our homes and hands for wholesomeness.

### **A Few of the Costs of Skipping Identity – Should we expect otherwise?**

- Dating too young – which locks in a craving for puppy love and emotional neediness; a fear of being alone (needing a “Number 2” in the sidelines) and displaces the time and interest in self mastery
- Inheriting unhealthy sexual appetites or abuse from sexual inhibitions, prohibition, over-sexualization and/or molestation
- Lack of emotional sensitivity and robustness to handle fears, hurts and anger
- Low self-esteem and lack of confidence which causes, among many other dynamics, jealousy, insecurity, bullying and emotional manipulation
- Misuse of power through either inflexible discipline and punishment or passive entitlement and self-indulgence
- Interruption of higher schooling, experimentation, travel, cultivation of skills and art forms
- Friends and community attached to other immature and/or compulsive people.

### **The immaturity and ignorance born of unfinished adolescence saddle us with:**

- Disrupted education, incompetence
- Inadequate or unhealthy coping mechanisms which lead to addiction
- False beliefs, unclear values, financial incompetence
- Psychological wounds leading to aggression, violence, defiance, combativeness
- Selfishness, hardened heart
- Lack of skills in lifestyle and relationships which engender single parents, divorce
- Confusion about differing personality and gender needs causing fighting, infidelity, co-habitation, domestic violence, breakups and divorce

- Sexual immaturity or wounds via compromised arousal maps through early sexual activity, exploitation, etc. making people sexually incompetent, deviated or abusive
- Romantic enmeshment, pregnancy, teen pregnancy, love addiction
- Alcohol, tobacco, drug use, and other addictions
- Problems in family functioning, lack of structure, school failure, mental illness
- Isolation in computers, gaming and virtual reality excluding the experience to communicate, create healthy relationships and a healthy lifestyle.

**We face a lack of:**

- Physical health
- Emotional intelligence
- Identity
- Strength of character
- Purpose
- Achievement.

With these handicaps, people justify compromising a respect for goodness. I hear the complaints of loneliness, lost hope, narrowed options, addiction, longing for a mate, tolerating abuse, boredom and emptiness.

**ADULTHOOD LOST:**

**GENERATIONAL JOURNEY:** Our times expose our unwillingness to value adulthood, with its requisite psychological agility, clear identity, responsible achievement, service to society and quality activities. We have been on a generational journey to stay young, to seek stimulus or thrills, sensory pleasure and present-moment novelty. (See “The Death of the Grown-Up: How America’s Arrested Development is Bringing Down Western Civilization” by Diana West.)

**TO CONFRONT, TO OPPOSE, TO EMULATE:** Our news media have been reporting incidents that display, as Leo Rosten observed, “what the dissatisfied students were looking for were adults—adults to confront, to oppose, to emulate.” Without education to keep our teens on track, today’s parents are lost in a snowballing trend to stay young and to avoid growing up.

**SELF-STIMULATE:** The immature personality has, what I call, “a 14-year-old value system.” Yes, it’s now sex, drugs, Rap & Metal on top of virtual reality all wielded by a teenager. Our youth are ready for substantial learning, creativity, adventure, mentoring, service and community. Because we haven’t yet been able to adequately provide these opportunities for succeeding with their developmental tasks, many of them become self-referential and get addicted to self-stimulation.

## **Time for Teachers and Mentors**

### **When Self-Stimulation is No Longer Enough: The Way Out of Confusion and Craving**

These stories of seeking the stimulation of a sexual liaison are signs to me of the innate cravings, which haven’t been fulfilled by a lifestyle that generates adult levels of caring, enthusiasm and creativity. If that is the case, we now know what to do. It’s a matter of growing up; it’s:

1. A Matter of the Heart – EQ and Psychological Agility
2. A Matter of Identity – Significance and Purpose
3. A Matter of Power – Enthusiasm and Achievement
4. A Matter of Mission – Creativity and Lifestyle

5. A Matter of Community – Friends and Society
6. A Matter of Intimacy – Commitment and Romance

Today's mentors and educators are fully prepared to teach all of these natural abilities now. The only obstacle is how to reach the people who are ready to learn. Perhaps the very mediums that deliver the bad news will create innovative means for delivering the information and resources.

by Heather Carlile  
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## LinkedIn Conversation:

**Anri van den Berg** Owner at Vita Nova Counselling Services  
[Johannesburg Area, South Africa](#) After infidelity in a relationship - how do you guys handle the healing process of the person who has been cheated on?

**Chris Trailer** • Perhaps the trickiest thing I've found during a recovery attempt is to point out that the "affair"--whether physical or emotional--did not happen in a vacuum. The person who was cheated on initially feels as though somehow you're suggesting it was their fault and the cheating partner is getting a "pass", when, in fact, you're just trying to set the stage for the couple to re-examine the dynamics and issues that were precursors to what lead to the affair/betrayal. Often, the betrayed partner has already gone through self-doubts about what kind of partner they've been to "cause" their partner to go out on them, so when you touch anywhere near that concept, they tend to cringe, understandably. The hope in recovery is that often there exists a real desire to forgive and the offending party often has true remorse; bringing those two elements together gives the therapist some leverage in helping them turn things around.

**Heather Carlile** • I appreciate your question, Anri. Here are a few things I can express briefly; I have thought about this and written at length on infidelity; its sources and resolutions:

Lack of Maturity

Lack of Emotional Intelligence

Lack of Knowledge

Lack of Skills

Thanks, Chris. After infidelity, I try to start fair by reminding the couple that there must be something missing (one or more of the above) in their marriage/relationship (best friends who are romantic). No blame, just logic, and let's figure that out.

Yes, the affair must be ended. And, I think there needs to be enough of the Five Languages of Apology and forgiveness...but it is not possible for an intelligent person to forget completely (such an injury, if forgotten, can happen again).

I want to be sure to remind them that this is a sledgehammer wake-up call. Something needs to change and improve.

The betrayed party often wants to know every detail - it's up to you how much of that you recommend. I think the less the better - less rumination and sooner on to what's relevant: what needs to change. Namely more talking, more time, more fun, more meaning, more help, etc...this is the point where the energy is so high that you can press the envelope of intimacy to the next level of vulnerability and caring.

And, then the grieving. Grief about something precious in a relationship usually affects many

secondary losses and, of most profundity, ends a sense of loss of a part of our own identity (a carefully-held role) and that is the most difficult to rebuild - often takes 3 years.

For more...

When I was presenting at NARME in 2012, I attended Dr. Scott Haltzman's introduction to his new book: *Secrets of Surviving Infidelity*. It was superb.

If you would like help in developing your own strengths, solutions and future, I can mentor you to succeed in all of these areas in person in my office, on the phone, via Skype or a Google+ Hangout.

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