

## Preventing Infidelity: How to Stop Affairs Before They Start

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It is estimated that approximately 46% of men and 25% of women will engage in an extra-marital affair during the lifetime of their marriage. Affairs, both physical and emotional, are devastating. The damage done after the discovery or revelation of an affair can destroy a marriage and family. Rebuilding a relationship after an affair, while certainly possible, can take a long time, and in some cases, may be unattainable. It is generally far better to prevent an affair from happening.

Be aware of the danger signs of infidelity. The late Shirley Glass, Ph.D., was among the leading researchers in the field of infidelity. She describes three signs that should indicate to a person that they have crossed a marital boundary, and may be dangerously close to having an affair.

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1. **Emotional intimacy** – Do you find yourself sharing deep thoughts and feelings with a member of the opposite sex? Do you discuss details of your marriage and problems with your partner? Would you not want your spouse to hear what you are saying?
2. **Sexual tension** – Do you find yourself sexually attracted to another person and imagine being with that person in a romantic way?
3. **Secrecy** – Do you leave out details of your day because they include spending time with the person you are attracted to? Do you lie to your spouse about this person?

*Be honest with yourself and your spouse and do not ignore these signs.*



It is a common myth that only people who are living in an unhappy marriage engage in affairs. This is far from reality. Sometimes, even people in happy marriages can find themselves tempted to become involved with another person outside of the marriage. The best way to prevent infidelity is to mutually “affair proof” your marriage. The following tips may be helpful.

## 1. Honor your spouse by honoring your marriage vow of fidelity.

Remind yourself daily of the commitment you and your spouse have made to one another. Frame a copy of your wedding vows and hang it someplace where you can see it daily as a gentle reminder of the vows you took. Fidelity is a decision and you and your spouse need to understand that you both intend to practice it.

## 2. Be aware of infidelity “danger zones.”

The workplace and the Internet can be dangerous to your marriage. Many people that engage in affairs meet at work or on-line.

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✓ Many jobs these days involve traveling, often with male and female colleagues going on business trips together. If there is a person from work that you feel you may develop an attraction for, protect your marriage by not spending time alone with that person. At work, or while traveling, socialize in groups. Be disciplined about your behavior in working relationships. Be careful about drinking

alcohol when traveling or at work parties. Do not disclose too much personal information to people at work. If you are having problems in your marriage, discuss this with a counselor not a friend or colleague of the opposite sex. A good rule of thumb in terms of preventing an affair is to ask yourself “would I be doing or saying this if my spouse was here”, if the answer is “no”, then you may be treading into the danger zone of infidelity.

- ✓ On-line relationships can be very dangerous to a marriage. Many marriages today are damaged by “emotional affairs” which occur via email, chat rooms, or other Web-based forums. Having a close friendship with a member of the opposite sex can sometimes lead to an emotional affair. Some indications of an emotional affair include sharing inappropriate or intimate thoughts or personal information, talking in detail about your marriage in a negative way, and keeping the relationship secret from your spouse. An “emotional affair” is often just as devastating to a marriage as a physical affair. In each case, one spouse has turned away from their partner, is being dishonest and is violating trust and honor in the marriage. Prevent on-line affairs by keeping the computer in a shared room such as a family room or kitchen where the screen cannot be hidden from your spouse. Avoid chat rooms and discussing emotional topics, personal or marital problems with people over the Internet.

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### 3. Know yourself and create open lines of communication with your spouse.

- ✓ Honestly assess if you may be vulnerable to an affair. Ask yourself if you are angry with your spouse; you feel resentful; find it hard to communicate; or you feel disconnected. Any of these feelings can make you more susceptible to an affair.

Consider taking a marriage education class that will teach you good communication and conflict management skills.

- ✓ Discuss your concerns with your partner, or meet with a couple's counselor together to learn how to approach difficult subjects.

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communication and conflict management skills. These can give you the skills you and your spouse need to have these conversations.

- ✓ Discuss together how to "affair-proof" your marriage. Find out what your partner is comfortable with in regards to relationships with members of the opposite sex and set guidelines for how each of you will behave in these situations. For example, you may agree that neither of you goes to dinner alone with a colleague while traveling for work.
- ✓ Discuss the boundaries and expectations of your marriage in terms of fidelity.

### 4. Discuss with your spouse whenever you are feeling attracted to another person.

The myth that once we are married we will never be attracted to anyone else can be very damaging and can create a lot of personal feelings of guilt and shame if not expressed. People in happy marriages may occasionally be attracted to someone else. By mutually acknowledging this they can redirect themselves and be reminded of their boundaries and commitment to their marriage. By not discussing these issues, they become "secret" and it becomes easier to get involved in an affair.

### 5. Make your marriage a priority.

Life is very busy and it is easy to get caught up in work and children and other things that consume your time and energy. Many people let their marriage fall lower on the priority list and take their spouse for granted. Set aside daily time to reconnect with your spouse, even if just for a short while. A cup of coffee together in the morning, a time alone to talk in the evening, a weekly lunch date or a walk together after dinner are some simple ways to stay connected. The amount of quiet time together does not have to be huge, but spending 15-20 minutes a day alone together will help to keep your marriage on track.

### 6. Create a marriage vision.

One way to do this is to take some time alone and write a very specific vision of what a great marriage looks like to you. After each partner defines their own vision, they should share this vision with each other

and discuss why each element is important. Using each of their “visions” the couple can then create a “shared vision.” Write this up, decorate it and hang it in a place where it will be seen everyday. This will remind you daily of your shared goals, aspirations and future within the marriage.

## **7. Make time for doing fun things in the marriage.**

The simple idea of “a family that plays together, stays together” is true. Having fun and laughing together helps keep

your relationship strong. It is easy to get bogged down with the business of life and many couples do not make time for fun. Make a list of things you enjoy doing together and make sure to do at least two things from the list each month. Continually add to your list and make sure it has a variety of activities to meet any budget.

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## **8. Having a good sex life and enjoying a sense of romance is an important part of a good marriage.**

Learn what each other’s idea of romance is, discuss what feels romantic to you. Be imaginative and creative. Let your partner know how attractive they are to you. Having a mutually satisfying physical relationship strengthens and deepens the bond between you and your spouse.

## **9. Make time for meaningful conversation.**

Know what is important to your partner and make time to talk about your shared goals (both short and long-term). Remind yourselves of the unique history you have together to share memories. Look through wedding and family photo albums together. Develop traditions and rituals that strengthen your marriage. Talking together about your future and your past can keep you bonded to one another.

Extra-marital affairs don’t “just happen”. Engaging in an affair can have devastating consequences that affect your life forever. There are clear steps and choices that lead into an affair. By following the above tips you can “affair proof” your marriage and prevent infidelity before it begins.

## **Additional Resources**

*“Not Just Friends: Protect Your Relationship from Infidelity and Heal the Trauma of Betrayal,”* Glass, Shirley, Ph.D. Free Press, New York, 2004

*Private Lies: Infidelity and the Betrayal of Intimacy* by Frank Pittman, WWNorton & Company 1969.

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***This is a product of the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center, led by co-directors Mary Myrick, APR, and Jeanette Hercik, Ph.D., and project manager Patrick Patterson, MSW, MPH.***

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