

Therapists advise couples confessing temptation

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Dismayed by a rash of affairs and divorces among acquaintances, Gloria and Bryan Mahan, of Cerritos, Calif., made an agreement before marrying each other three years ago: If either of them felt attracted to someone else, he or she would tell the other partner immediately. "I don't want to be a divorce statistic," says Bryan, now 26.

When Gloria later found herself attracted to another man, as difficult as it was, she confessed that fact to Bryan. He responded calmly, saying he appreciated her honesty. "That built a lot of trust for me," says Gloria, now 24. The attraction quickly faded and her bond to Bryan grew stronger.

An emerging trend in marriage therapy and education aims to head off one of the biggest risks in marriage: infidelity. Instead of waiting until after spouses stray and then attempting damage control, therapists and marriage educators are urging couples to build trust upfront by acknowledging the possibility of cheating and heading it off through explicit spoken or written agreements. Some couples are taking similar steps on their own.

This can require painful self-disclosure. Andy Laurents, who has such an agreement with his wife, Patti, says several women on a previous job made advances toward him - "I'd be lying if I said I wasn't intrigued." Each time, he says, it was difficult "to look at my dear wife and tell her 'I've been attracted to someone else.'" But he did so, and that discipline immediately shifted his focus back to his wife, where he wants it to be, he says. Both partners say their pact has fortified trust and strengthened their happy nine-year marriage.

The agreements are part of a broader emphasis on trust-building in marriage. In a pop culture riddled with images of infidelity and marital mistrust, experts are using a variety of techniques to "super-glue couples together," says Diane Sollee, founder of SmartMarriages.com, a marriage-education Web site. "It's a huge crisis right now. Twenty- and thirty-somethings are just terrified. They've seen the divorce rates and they see what's happened to their parents, and they think they can't trust" prospective spouses.

In Washington, Barry McCarthy, a psychologist in private practice and a professor at American University, gives couples a two-page handout urging them to identify risk factors for an affair (such as drinking when apart), to agree to talk before acting on any extramarital desires and, if a partner does stray, to disclose that within 24 hours. "It's the coverup that has the most negative impact," Dr. McCarthy says.

At Colorado retreats called "Love Your Relationship," run by a Boulder, Colo., organization by the same name, couples are taught to acknowledge the risk of infidelity and to build skills that help "affair-proof" their marriages, says Howard Markman, an author who teaches the seminars, and co-founder of PREP, a marriage-education program. Separately, John Van Epp, a therapist and author of "How to Avoid Marrying a Jerk," has trained 500 Army chaplains and several dozen private therapists in the past year on how to help people pick trustworthy partners and to build strong bonds with their mates.

Much of this work is grounded in "attachment theory," a body of psychological research on how humans bond to one another starting in infancy. Working on the knowledge that many people enter marriage with an impaired ability to form intimate attachments, therapists aim to help couples consciously construct a new foundation for trust. Dr. Van Epp uses a "relationship attachment model" - a graphic tool that looks like a five-dial stereo-system equalizer. Each sliding vertical dial symbolizes one of five building blocks of attachment: knowledge about each other's past and present lives; trust; mutual reliance on each other; commitment; and sexual intimacy.

When all five ingredients are present and in balance, Dr. Van Epp says, marriages tend to be strong. Couples are taught to evaluate their relationships on each of the five dimensions of attachment using a cardboard model of the tool.

The Army has used chaplains trained by Dr. Van Epp, the PREP program and others to instruct 25,000 soldiers in the past year in a marriage-education program called "Strong Bonds." Mindful of an estimated 60 percent divorce rate among military couples, officials aim to help couples sustain trust through deployments.

People are at greater risk of infidelity when they or their family members have had affairs, Dr. McCarthy says. One couple he counseled, who had actually met each other through an extramarital affair, agreed in writing that if either felt the urge to stray, they'd talk to each other about it first. They stored the accord in a safe-deposit file at home with other important documents, says Dr. McCarthy, co-author of "Getting It Right This Time."

One bonus, couples say, is that telling your spouse about an extramarital desire tends to quash it. When Mr. Laurent talked with his wife about workplace temptations, he says, "all of a sudden, that power, that pull, was gone in a flash. When you shine the light on something, then the darkness goes away. It has no choice."

As lay leaders of a couples' group at their church, he and his wife urge others to be equally open, he says: "You can save yourselves so many heartaches down the road."

To guard against damage from affairs, experts suggest couples:

Acknowledge the risk of an affair occurring

Discuss circumstances that might pose a risk

Agree to talk about temptations before acting

Disclose any affairs promptly

Agree not to counterattack if a spouse strays

Learn to ask, give and receive forgiveness

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