

affair- proofing your marriage

*Why affairs happen and how to
protect your marriage from them*



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INTRODUCTION

marriage is a trip

Think of your *perfect road trip*. For me, there's a tank full of gas. The luggage fits just perfectly. You packed the best snacks (we're talking fresh-baked goodies here, no stale chips), and the drinks are ice-cold. Traffic is light, the tunes are crankin', and the temperature is just right for rolling down the windows.

To me, that's the Best. Road. Trip. Ever.

Maybe you'd rather have hot coffee and the windows up. And maybe you'd rather take the backroads instead of the highway. Your perfect road trip might look different from mine, and that's ok! But there's one key question you have to answer: Where the heck are you goin'? I mean, you're not in this for just the cold drinks or the wind in your hair. There's a destination at stake here.

Then again... (cue the sound of screeching tires and ominous music) jumping the curb and running into a ditch spells disaster for the perfect road trip. One little distraction, one slippery spot on the road, and you're thrown way off course to your ideal destination spot.





Marriage is a trip, and your destination is a happy, healthy, growing relationship.

And marital infidelity is the ditch looming on the other side of the curb.

How do you avoid jumping that curb and throwing yourself off course? Here's a hard fact: No one is immune to infidelity. Happy or unhappy. Intimate or not. Conflictual or compliant. The door is always open. The danger of running off the road is always present.

Many couples assume infidelity can never happen in their marriage if they can keep up certain requisites. *No fighting. Frequent sex. Church attendance. Remembering anniversaries and birthdays. Weekly date nights.*

And while some of these may be signs of a functional marriage, they don't negate the possibility of cheating. That would be a lot like saying checking your tire pressure will ensure a dog won't run out in front of you on the highway. ***There's just no guarantee.***

But it's not all doom and gloom. Perhaps you're questioning where exactly your marriage trip is going and you wonder just how possible it is for your marriage to veer off the road. Or maybe you're confident you're cruising in the right direction, but you simply want to take the right precautions.

Whatever the case, you're hoping for some tools, skills, and steps. We commend you for taking the initiative to strengthen your marriage!

And I have great news for you...

There is hope.

(I mean, that's what you're here for, right?)

While you can't control everything your spouse does, you can control your own actions and together, take steps to make your marriage **more resistant** to infidelity. (Think of it like this: Good tires won't stop the dog, but they'll sure help you stay on the road when you need to swerve. *Resistant.*) And that's what the rest of this e-book is about. (*Infidelity-resistance. Not tires and dogs...*)

You'll be guided through what infidelity is, how it can creep into even the most unsuspecting marriage, and what steps you can take to avoid running off the road. **This is your safety guide for your marriage trip.**

And most of all, I hope this will help you gain a better sense of where you want your trip to go. Because when you know your destination, you're much better prepared to avoid infidelity and keep your marriage between the lines.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Chris S. Darnley". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

SECTION ONE

what is infidelity?

Samuel gets along with everyone. His warm, outgoing personality (not to mention a need for approval from others) helps him connect on deeper levels with folks... especially with one of his female co-workers, Stacey. Lately, he's found himself in more and more lengthy conversations with Stacey and the two of them have grabbed a cup of coffee out a couple of times during lunch breaks. Stacey is intriguing, attractive, a great listener, and very affirming of Samuel's ideas and dreams, something he feels he doesn't get a lot of from his wife at home. Stacey just makes Samuel feel... good.

When Samuel's wife, Lisa, becomes aware of his growing friendship with Stacey and questions him about it, he gets irritated. Lisa feels betrayed. Samuel's thinking is, *What's the big deal? Stacey encourages me in a way Lisa doesn't. And, besides, it's not like I'm cheating and we're having sex! I'm still faithful!*

What do you think? Is Samuel doing anything wrong? Does Lisa have a right to feel betrayed? Is there any infidelity going on here?

To answer these questions, you've got to know these three things: ***the definition of infidelity, what all it entails, and how it can affect you and your marriage.*** Because understanding what infidelity is helps you avoid it and keep your marriage between the lines.

**What's the big deal?
She's just a co-worker.**



defining infidelity

Let's just call it how it is: Marital infidelity is difficult to talk about. Chances are, most people have been affected by infidelity in some way, whether in their family of origin, a circle of friends, or in their own relationships. It's unpleasant at the very least; at the most, **painful and damaging**.

Nailing down a good definition for infidelity, however, is another issue. Although it's been around for all of human history, there's still a ton of misconceptions and misunderstandings about it. Even professionals struggle to define the term, and most people tend to have their own view of exactly what cheating is (and isn't) in their own eyes¹ (*which can cause tension if two people in a marriage have differing views*²). Chances are, you have your own perspective of what actions constitute infidelity. A closer look at how it can be defined is helpful.

In general, research puts infidelity into three broad categories³:

**sexual
infidelity**

**non-
intercourse
physical
infidelity**

**emotional
infidelity**

sexual infidelity

You don't have to be a relationship expert to know what we mean here. It's what most people think when they hear marital infidelity. Sexual intercourse with someone other than one's spouse is considered by most to be *an unfaithful act of betrayal*. The exception is a very small percentage of couples who have open marriages, are swingers, or practice polyamorous relationships; but, these topics are beyond the scope of this e-book.

non-intercourse physical infidelity

Behaviors that are sexual in nature but are not sexual intercourse make up this second category. Anything from holding hands or kissing to mutual masturbation or oral sex, having sexual fantasies about another, flirting (sometimes called *microcheating*), and online behaviors like viewing pornography, cybersex, online dating, and sending flirtatious text messages are seen as forms of cheating.

Clearly, this category spans a wide range of behaviors. Many feel the line is blurred between innocent behavior and crossing the curb into cheating territory (like Samuel above). I mean, what's the harm in a little flirtatious conversation as long as no one's taking their clothes off? The truth is, there's a huge potential for danger with any of these choices. *More on that in a bit...*

emotional infidelity

While more complex and harder to define,⁴ emotional infidelity is reported to be **the most common type**.⁵ One of the best definitions of emotional infidelity offered by one study captures how the majority of people see it:

*Emotional infidelity is when a person in a [marriage] creates **an emotional distance** by spending **an excessive amount of time** with, or thinks about, another person outside the relationship, **to the point that the other partner becomes ignored or rejected emotionally.***

Two dynamics in this definition need attention:

1. The “cheater” is doing something to become emotionally involved with and closer to someone other than their spouse.
2. By their behavior, they're creating an emotional distance between them and their spouse. An emotional deficit is created.

The beginning of an emotional affair is a lot like your tire rubbing up against the curb as you're sailing down the highway, and it's a brief matter of time before the marriage ***flips upside down in the ditch***. Research tells us that the effects of emotional infidelity can be just as impactful as sexual and non-intercourse physical infidelity.⁶

So, what might emotional infidelity look like in real life?

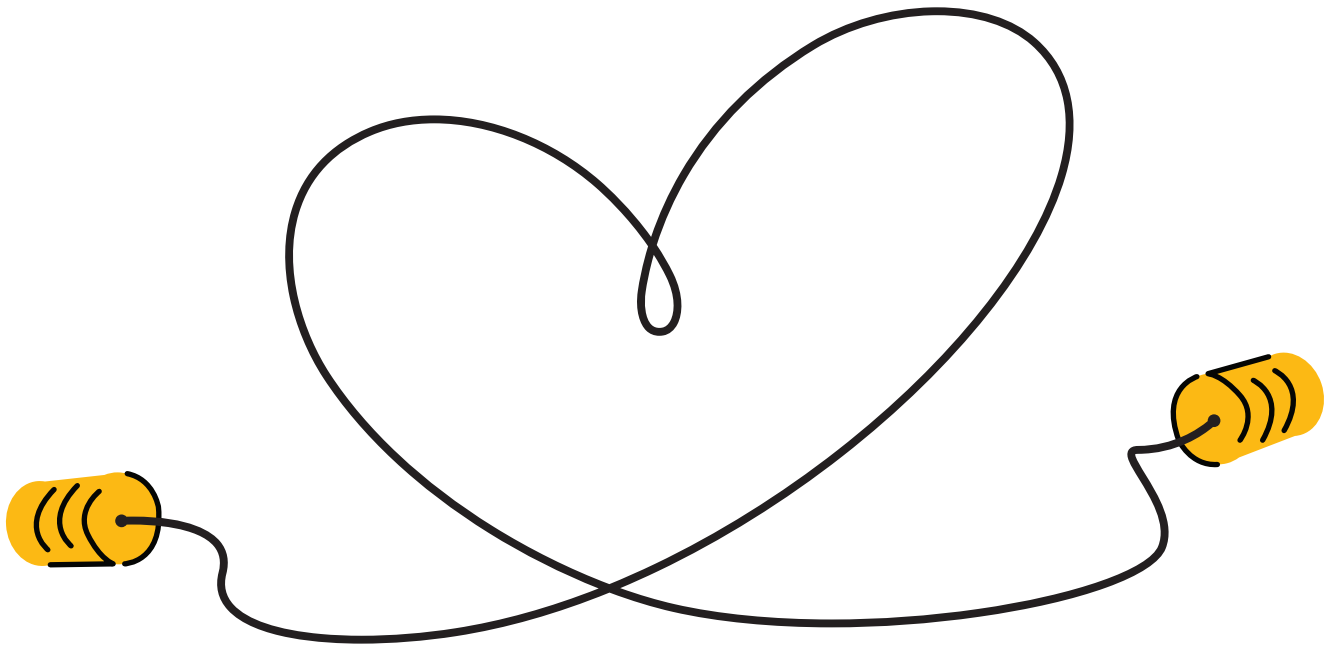
**let's take a
closer look at
samuel's situation
with stacey**



In a short length of time, Samuel has developed a deep, emotional attachment to Stacey, although he wouldn't define it (at this point) as sexual. The coffee meet-ups and deep conversations are increasing because, quite frankly, he enjoys them so much. He confides in her about his struggles, particularly within his marriage, and finds Stacey to be a good sounding board in explaining any grievances he has about his wife. Stacey has become a strong emotional support and fulfills Samuel's emotional needs (in a way, Samuel feels, Lisa doesn't). Samuel often thinks, *if it wasn't for Lisa, I could see Stacey as someone I could fall in love with*. He goes out of his way to hide text messages or voicemails from Stacey. Samuel still feels he *wants* to be faithful to Lisa. But, he also believes *as long as no one is getting hurt and no one is sleeping around, what Lisa doesn't know won't hurt her*.

Two major marks of emotional infidelity:

Any of these behaviors happen ***with someone other than one's spouse*** and ***without the spouse knowing***. They are kept in the dark about conversations, meet-ups, emotional support, and any kind of feelings toward another person.



Emotional affairs can happen without any kind of physical sexual behavior going on.

In a way, this makes the potential for harm in the marriage greater; how a person feels is often more elusive and difficult to avoid than blatant sexual advances.

any combo of these types of infidelity

Okay, so this is a fourth category. **But it has to be acknowledged that any of the cheating behaviors above can happen in combination.** And these behaviors often escalate, leading into one another. What begins as harmless flirting can quickly turn into an emotional attachment. Emotional connection can be a gateway that leads to sexual consummation.

wait, then is a friendship the same as infidelity?

The short answer is, *it depends*. What behaviors are involved in that friendship? How does the nature of a friendship affect the trust level between spouses? And perhaps most importantly, is the friendship shared with one's spouse? Or, are there any aspects of the friendship that are secret or hidden from their partner?

the bottom line:

When a friendship either has a **negative effect** on the marriage or the spouse is **kept in the dark** about what goes on in that friendship, the marriage is in an **extreme danger zone for emotional infidelity**.



VEHICLE MAINTENANCE

traction control

Because there is a wide range of “cheating behaviors” and people have **differing perspectives of what marital infidelity is (and is not)**, it’s vital for couples to have **honest, meaningful conversations about where the curb lies along their road of the marriage journey**.

These convos form the framework for your **marriage’s traction control system**. If a vehicle’s traction control system detects that a wheel is slipping, it applies the brakes until it regains traction. Likewise, having these boundaries and expectations up front can help pump the breaks on any slippery behaviors that may cause an accident to happen.

Start the convo off with these questions:

How will unfaithfulness and betrayal be defined in our relationship?

Is there anything that I’m currently doing that you view as a slippery behavior?

What do you consider emotional infidelity in our marriage?

the secret sauce

There is one tie that binds almost all behaviors of marital infidelity: Inherent in all categories are elements of **secrecy, deceit, and betrayal**.

Cheating behaviors are done **in secret**, intentionally kept from one's spouse. Flirtation with a workmate happens only when a spouse *isn't* present (but the person "behaves" when the spouse is around). Internet histories or text messages are deleted to hide porn sites or flirty texts.

Some may easily justify their behavior by rationalizing: *If she knew how I acted, it'd just hurt her, or what he doesn't know won't hurt him*. But these justifications are pretty weak in light of the idea that these kinds of actions drive a wedge in the marriage and open the door for deeper levels of infidelity.

Secrecy can quickly turn into deceit, causing the cheating spouse to lie about their actions.

When secrecy and deceit come to light, it causes feelings of **betrayal** in the spouse. Although people may disagree about what actions constitute infidelity in their relationship, *they all agree it is a betrayal of trust*.

My phone died on my work trip, so I wasn't able to answer your call last night.

I'm meeting some friends at the bar for some drinks. 🍺

We have to spend time with each other for work projects.



the effect of infidelity

Infidelity of all kinds has devastating effects on both the marriage, the “betrayed,” and the “betrayed.”

- **Infidelity causes extreme relationship distress and is one of the most cited reasons for divorce.**⁷ *(As a matter of fact, it's cited more times than incompatibility or problematic drug use!)*
- **Couples experience mental health struggles,**⁸ such as anguish, psychological pain, depression, anger, and humiliation.⁹
- **The betrayed spouse often feels a loss of identity, sense of specialness with their spouse, and a sense of purpose,**¹⁰ as well as shame, embarrassment, and a sense of betrayal and anger toward their spouse.¹¹
- **The betrayer often feels an extreme sense of guilt and loss of self-esteem.**
- **Both in the marriage can feel an extreme physical toll from the chronic stress, agitation, and exhaustion of dealing with the issue, often causing health issues.**
- **The couple's family and friend network can be negatively affected.**¹²

let's look at another
real-life example:
paula and miguel

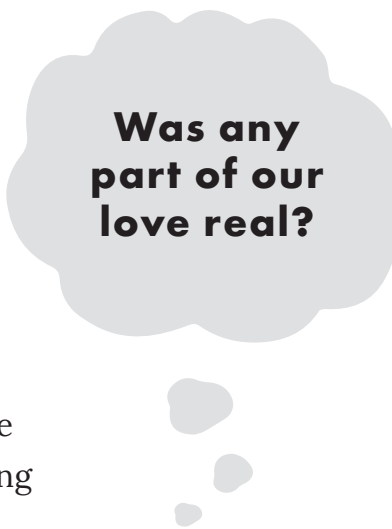


Unfaithfulness has rocked Paula and Miguel's marriage. Even after Paula's single act of betrayal came to light and the two began attending marriage counseling, the aftershock is still felt. Miguel, obviously, feels betrayed. He is questioning whether their marriage has been a sham all this time. *Was any part of our love real? Was it something I did? Does this mean I'm a terrible husband? Am I even a real man? What about our friends and family – will I ever be able to look them in the eyes without feeling... deficient?* Dealing with these kinds of questions has caused Miguel to develop an anxiety disorder as well as depressive symptoms.

It's taken a toll on Paula as well. Her guilt and shame has led her to develop chronic stress and depression, so much so that it's affected her physical health. A lack of appetite and sleep has weakened her immune system.

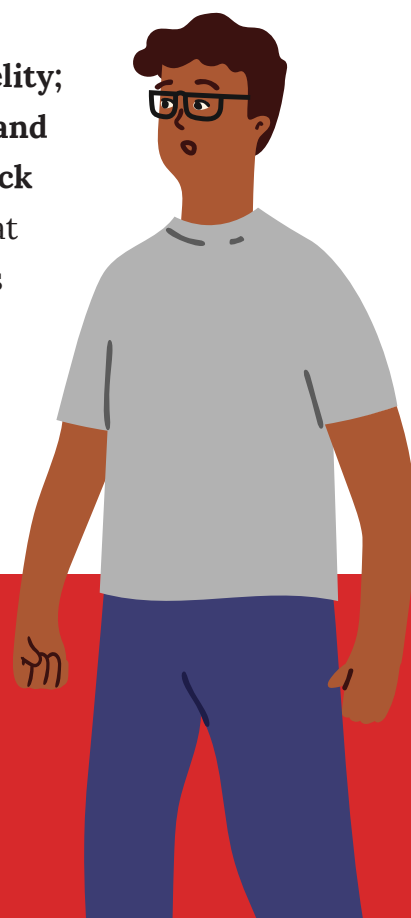
Friends and family often don't know how to act around Paula and Miguel. Some are angry and have totally cut Paula off. Others are uncomfortable with the drama and no longer invite the couple to get-togethers. Although Paula and Miguel are attending counseling sessions, they know it's going to be a long road to recovery.

All is not hopeless in a marriage that's experienced infidelity; marriages are resilient, and studies show that with work and therapy, couples typically stand a good chance of bouncing back from marital infidelity.¹³ However, marital counselors do say that infidelity is *one of the most challenging issues* to help couples work through, given many of the effects discussed above. All that to say, knowing how to avoid crossing that curb can help make your marriage infidelity-resistant and save a ton of pain and heartache.



Was any part of our love real?

So, if infidelity is so damaging, why does it happen so much in marriages? What causes a person to be unfaithful?



SECTION TWO

how does infidelity happen?

Remember Paula and Miguel? It came out of nowhere, Paula thought. It started with just a couple of drinks while at a conference, and some good conversation (never mind the flirtatious overtones) with a younger guy. I didn't even give a second thought to my husband, Miguel, two states over. (It's not like we've been exactly close lately.) And just like that, we found ourselves in his hotel room. How could this have happened?

Car wrecks happen (unfortunately), and for many reasons.

Another vehicle unexpectedly swerves in front of you. There's a slippery patch of oil on the road. Your car malfunctions. Your passenger distracts you. (Okay, this one is really your fault. But if you want to blame the passenger, go ahead...)

There's a lot that can contribute to the likelihood of infidelity happening in marriage as well. Infidelity has been studied to better understand what motivates a person to betray their spouse. And while there's always much more to learn, knowing contributing factors can help prevent a marriage from experiencing it.

What (or who) could be culprits which might cause a spouse to cheat?

the cheater

There's an old country song from the 1960s called *Your Cheatin' Heart* that describes a former love who's destined to wallow in their cheating ways for the rest of their lives. It's just who they are.

Does such a heart exist? Is there a cheating type? Something about the cheater that makes them more prone toward betrayal?

One common belief out there is that **men** cheat more (or, as some think, *all men* cheat). **Gender is one of the most commonly researched characteristics for infidelity.** And, indeed, many past studies have indicated that men do cheat more than women, at least when it comes to sexual intercourse. For some, this seems logical. *Of course – it's always the man!*

However, more recent studies show a narrowing gap between the number of men and women who cheat.¹ Part of this may be that we are beginning to define infidelity as *more than just extramarital sex*; studies have shown that when reporting on cheating behavior to include *non-intercourse and emotional affairs*, the numbers are **fairly even** between men and women.² And while some reports suggest men are more motivated by sexual desire and women by emotional connection,^{3, 4, 5} it's important to know that gender norms may influence many women to downplay their sexual desire and vice versa for men.⁶

Translation: *Cheatin' hearts aren't just male hearts. Men and women are equally susceptible to betrayal in marriage.*⁷



what about **personality**?

So if gender can't predict who would be likely to cheat, what about other factors?

Do cheatin' hearts just have a certain personality type?

Studies have shown a strong connection between infidelity and personality.⁸ And although there is still a lot of research work to be done to understand it better, several traits are identified that just may influence a cheatin' heart:

- **Anxiety, pessimism, emotional instability, or worry**
- **Suspicion, distrust, or uncooperativeness**
- **Impulsiveness, disorganization, unreliability, or lack of self-discipline⁹**
- **Lack of self-control^{10, 11}**
- **Feelings of superiority over others or a lack of empathy¹²**
- **Seeking high levels of intimacy or approval from others¹³**
- **Sensation-seeking: the need or desire for sensations and experiences that are varied, novel, and intense¹⁴**
- **Low self-esteem^{15, 16}**
- **Alcohol use and abuse¹⁷**
- **Anger, lack of love, low commitment, or neglect of spouse¹⁸**

On the surface, it may make sense how the traits above could be connected to infidelity. And just to be clear, the presence of any of these personality characteristics *doesn't* mean a person is destined to be a cheater. However, someone who recognizes these traits in themselves would do well to consider how they might be *predisposed* toward a greater temptation for infidelity.

But let's keep one thing in mind: We *all* (to some degree) have a tendency to worry, seek approval, lack self-control, or struggle with self-esteem (or any of the other personality behaviors described above). It's important to remember that every person out there has some predisposition to the risk of committing infidelity in their marriage. *Moments of weakness present themselves to everyone.*



VEHICLE MAINTENANCE

engine temperature

An overheated engine can cause a lot of trouble and needs attention immediately to avoid damage. The less thermal stress you put on your vehicle's components, the healthier it will be. Likewise, someone who runs a bit hot with a fiery personality could find themselves putting unintentional stress on their marriage. Which could, in turn, lead to a greater risk of being unfaithful.

A key to preventing infidelity in marriage is **knowing yourself**. This takes a good bit of reflection and honesty, not to mention a dose of humility.

Ask yourself these questions:

Do I identify with any of the personality traits listed?

What steps have I taken so far to work past negative personality traits?

Have any of those traits affected my marriage in any way?

It's good to be aware of whether you tend to have stronger tendencies toward personality traits like these, but keep in mind: *We all have the ability to cheat.*

Personality, however, may not be the only factor at play. What if it's something outside the cheatin' heart?

the marriage

What if there's something *within* the marriage relationship itself that makes infidelity more likely to occur?

A big question research has asked is, *Does a bad marriage cause infidelity, or does infidelity cause a marriage to go bad?* The answer: **Yes to both!**¹⁹ It's a reciprocal issue, which may be why marital unfaithfulness is reported to be one of the most difficult issues to work through in counseling.

Studies show that when there is low relationship satisfaction or a high degree of conflict in a marriage, it's at greater risk for infidelity.^{20, 21} "Relational distancing," a rift in communication and intimacy, indicates that one or both people are moving closer to having an affair.²² Spending a significant amount of time apart without connection is also a substantial risk factor.²³ Furthermore, it's important to understand that when one or both people in a marriage bring up the possibility of divorce into the narrative (either by thinking about it or talking with their spouse or another person about it), the likelihood of committing infidelity *increases*.

If a couple experiences a gap in their intimacy, communication, or connection, **awareness and a commitment to getting back on track in their relationship is key to avoiding any negative impacts**, including a higher likelihood of infidelity.

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VEHICLE MAINTENANCE

oil pressure

Oil helps your car to run smoothly by providing a layer of protection between the parts so that they don't grind against each other and cause damage. However, over time, many internal and external factors can cause that oil to become less effective. **Likewise, your marriage runs the best when it is well oiled with good communication, intimacy and connection.**

Now, assessing your marital relationship may be challenging. But it can be an important step in preventing your marriage from jumping the infidelity curb. You have to be honest about both the good, the bad, and the ugly. And it's best to consider this as a couple, even if you have differing views.

Together, think about these questions:

How would each of us rate
our connection as a couple?
Our communication?

Is there any sign of relational
distancing going on?

How can we both
increase our connection
on a regular basis?

But don't miss this: For all we know about which marriages may be more predisposed to jumping the infidelity curb, we also know there are many with **good marriages** – where communication is on point, the word divorce is never mentioned, and intimacy is high – who have reported crossing over into an affair.

the bottom line:

Unhealthy marriages are certainly more at risk, but a marriage that's healthy is not **automatically affair-proof.**

the spouse

Okay, this one's tricky. To be up front: *No one forces another to go astray in their marriage.* It's the cheater's decision, and the fault lies on the cheater alone. They chose infidelity, probably through a series of smaller choices. It all might've been avoided if they chose to ignore a text, not step into a co-worker's hotel room, unfollow someone on social media, or not share things only their spouse should hear.

That being said, this is also true: **Each person in a marriage contributes to its full context and narrative in some way, whether directly or indirectly. What is said and done carries influence.**

It's kind of like a passenger who constantly badgers the driver to look at something on their phone. You can't *blame* the passenger because the driver ran off the road. But the passenger was certainly an *influencing* factor. Therapist and author Esther Perel points out: "*Cheating happens in the shadow of marriage, but the marriage also lives in the center of the affair... The victim of the affair is not always the victim of the marriage.*"²⁴ In other words, the faithful partner, to one degree or another, can be one dimension of infidelity, just as personality traits can be a key for understanding how it happened.

Let's go back to samuel's affair.

Samuel never imagined himself as someone who'd stray. But his emotional affair (which quickly transitioned to a sexual affair) with Stacey from work **changed all that.**



His wife, Lisa, experienced a number of emotional struggles, especially since she and Samuel had their first child two years ago, and, as a result, her personality seemed to have changed. Lisa was more abrasive toward Samuel, especially when he came home from a long day at work. She would tend to complain of how he never did anything at home and she was forced to be stuck at home with a crying child. Lisa would, at times, isolate herself in another room due to her depression. Sexual intimacy between the two was nonexistent, and they rarely did anything together as a couple. While Samuel acknowledges his complete responsibility for cheating on Lisa, deep inside he also knows her behavior at home made the door easier to walk through.



Individuals who rated their spouses to be less agreeable, compassionate, and cooperative, or more impulsive and less disciplined, tended to be unhappier in their marriages and therefore more prone to infidelity.²⁵ A perceived need to seek high levels of intimacy and approval from others is also related to having a partner who engages in infidelity.²⁶ Additionally, those who had a higher likelihood of cheating in the first few years of marriage reported their spouse as “highly neurotic,” meaning they tended to have more emotional instability and psychological distress, such as anxiety, depression, or pessimism.^{27, 28}

All this to say, the emotional health of *both people* in the relationship seems to be a big factor in the likelihood of infidelity occurring. **Non-cheating spouses are not the cause of their spouse’s behavior, but every spouse is an influencer.**

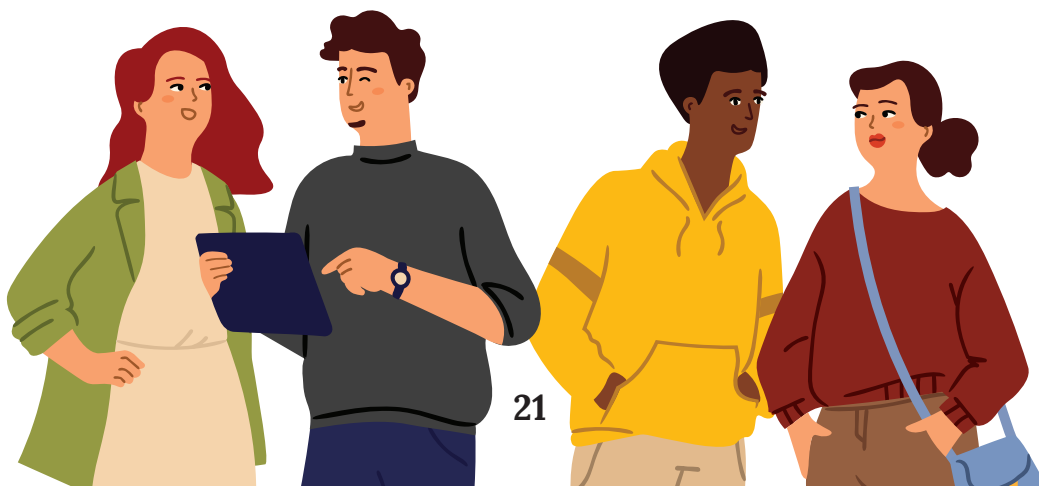
the circumstances

Sometimes road conditions can cause a driver to jump the curb: icy patches, oil spills, high winds, or objects in the middle of the lane. And while the driver can't control these circumstances, a lack of alertness and precaution are what ultimately causes disaster.

Similarly, a person may often find themselves in situations where there are increased opportunities for affairs.²⁹ The workplace, business trips, bars, coffee shops, even places of worship can present alternatives to one's spouse and open a bigger temptation to engage in cheating behavior. Of course, no one can totally avoid these kinds of circumstances; the idea, however, is to *be aware* of these circumstances at any given moment and to check the heart and the mind.

Another important factor is the crowd a person hangs around with. One study found that people were more likely and willing to engage in extramarital sex if they had friends who did the same or believed their friends did the same.³⁰ We are often a mirror of those we surround ourselves with, and it seems the propensity toward infidelity can easily become a part of that reflection.

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VEHICLE MAINTENANCE

windshield wiper fluid

Windshield wipers are imperative to have, especially in bad weather conditions. Having your windshield wiper fluid filled up helps to ensure **awareness of your surroundings on the road, so you can look out for any potential danger.** Just like being aware of your circumstances and any danger zones can help protect your marriage.

So ask yourself:

Are there any circumstances that I'm currently in that could be a potential threat to my marriage commitment?

If so, how can I keep myself in check during situations like these?

One more very pertinent point needs to be made about the role technology can play. Cellphones, social media, and the internet have made it easier to maintain the secrecy and deceit of infidelity. Some experts have explained this through what they call the Triple A Model.³¹ The opportunity for cheating is (*quite literally*) at one's fingertips through technology's:

Accessibility
to social
media platforms
& websites

Affordability
in engaging
in online
infidelity

Anonymity
in that a person
can have any type
of identity online

The lesson here is that technology makes marital infidelity more secretive, tempting, and obtainable. **But what if a circumstance before the wedding bells ever rang could've pointed a person toward betrayal?**

before marriage

Certain things that have happened before the wedding, even possibly before a couple meets, can influence the likelihood of marital infidelity.

For example, there is strong evidence that what a person experienced growing up in their family of origin could impact the likelihood that they engage in infidelity later on.³² In particular, a strong link was found between folks who were likely to cheat and those who said:

- ✓ *They experienced a parent who cheated.*
- ✓ *The marriage satisfaction of their parents was low.*
- ✓ *There was a high level of conflict between their parents.*
- ✓ *Their parents were not currently married.*

Other studies have suggested that those who had premarital sex, cohabited before marriage, or had their first intercourse at a young age were more likely to cheat.³³



VEHICLE MAINTENANCE

check your mirrors

Objects in mirror are closer than they appear. Just like your past experiences are often more influential to your current relationships than you realize. And while yes, sometimes it can be difficult to revisit old wounds, reflecting on childhood and other past experiences can often help us understand how our behavior in current relationships has been influenced.

Spend time examining how your childhood and past relationships may be affecting you now. (Pro Tip: Journaling is a great way to start!)

You may be asking, *if something is a part of my past, how do I fix that? I can't exactly change my experiences.* No one can control their past nor what their parents did. **But awareness of risk factors involved in a person's family of origin and past relationships can be a powerful tool for avoiding infidelity (not to mention overall unhealthiness) in a person's marriage.**

In other words, if a person finds themselves where they have a particular predisposition toward infidelity by any of the factors listed above, it in no way means they are predestined to cheat. **Awareness of these predispositions and taking some proactive steps to change what one can are powerful weapons to prevent infidelity from affecting a marriage.**

At the same time, every marriage, regardless of risk factors, has the potential to hit the curb. So no matter your personality, background, or marriage, it's best to keep a healthy defensive posture. No cheatin' hearts here.

a word about intimacy

Despite well-known risk factors that could influence a person to be unfaithful, many who have cheated have reported their behavior came out of nowhere. *We started out having these great conversations, and before we knew it, we were sharing a bed together. How does this happen?* **Intimacy** might have something to do with it.

What usually separates one level of relationship from another is the **level of intimacy**. We're talking more than *sexual* intimacy here (although that can certainly be part of it.) A best friend knows you better than an acquaintance; and your spouse (hopefully) knows you better than a best friend.

Intimacy grows in a relationship through time and vulnerability. It's often marked by deep conversations and the feeling of a spark, something that makes you just click with them. You disclose parts of yourself that you normally wouldn't tell just anyone. You've probably experienced that before with others besides your spouse, and that's all well and good.

But intimacy can quickly grow into admiration, trust, and attraction. **It's especially problematic if there is a lack of intimacy at home**; a person begins to find something in someone else they can't seem to find in their spouse.

One more point to make here: The vast majority of affairs are not sought out. People don't usually run into the arms of another; they tip-toe, little choice by little choice. Most cheaters don't go out of their way to cheat and start an affair. *But they end up there.*

With that being said, couples can take small, continual, and consistent proactive steps to safeguard against infidelity becoming an issue and to keep their marriage between the lines.



SECTION THREE

how to keep your marriage infidelity- resistant

Theo and Gigi's marriage has certainly had its share of threats. Gigi's father cheated on her mom when Gigi was 14, resulting in a messy divorce. Neither Gigi nor Theo grew up in a family where they witnessed healthy communication or conflict management skills. And Theo is a recovering pornography addict with a history of anxiety. Although he's been porn-clean for four years now, these and other factors, according to the research, make Theo and Gigi highly vulnerable to experiencing infidelity in their marriage.



But neither one of them is letting their guard down. They've been very diligent in taking a defensive stance in their relationship against unfaithfulness. Aware of their lack of healthy relationship skills, both attend marriage classes on a regular basis to learn better ways to communicate and connect as a couple. Both have attended counseling; Gigi, to learn how to better cope with her childhood trauma, and Theo, to maintain his sobriety from pornography and struggles with anxiety. The couple has made Friday their regular date night, sends check-in texts to each other during the day, and makes it a goal to have sex twice a week. With every ounce of effort they put into their marriage, Gigi and Theo are building a higher curb to create an infidelity-resistant marriage.

The possibility for infidelity is always present. The moment you think, *That could never happen to me*, or *Infidelity is a problem in other marriages, not ours*, is exactly when you are most vulnerable. **No marriage is completely cheat-proof. However, you really can have an infidelity-resistant relationship by:**

- ✓ *Developing a better understanding of what cultivates intimacy with your spouse*
- ✓ *Choosing to cultivate that intimacy with your spouse*
- ✓ *Guarding against inappropriate intimacy with others*

Avoiding marital infidelity may seem in some ways easy, and in other ways, difficult.

On the one hand, it sounds simple enough to take all the factors of betrayal mentioned above and, well, get rid of them. It seems easy, but many dispositions are out of one's control, like family of origin experiences. Other factors, like a tendency toward anxiety or approval-seeking, often involve a lifelong process of coping.

On the other hand, it might seem you have to do some huge, grandiose, marital feats to ensure a life of faithfulness. And while some may need to make a life-changing decision, like a job change or relocation to protect their marriage, this kind of thinking can make avoiding betrayal feel like an overwhelming task.

Making your marriage infidelity-resistant is much more than trying to remove factors. It's taking proactive, protective measures. And studies tell us it's the small, continuous, and consistent efforts that promote healthy marriages and prevent infidelity.¹

And there are two main ways to do this:



focus on your marriage

If marital infidelity is linked to marital health, it stands to reason that strengthening the marriage adds a protective layer of cheat-resistance. Research suggests several measures to take to prevent jumping the curb and running off the marriage road:²

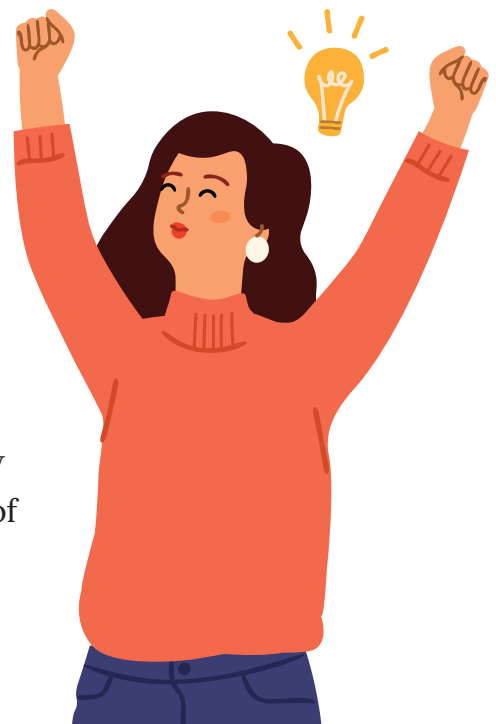
> foster your beliefs about and commitment to a healthy marriage

How you intentionally and consistently think about your marriage commitment matters. Building infidelity-resistance starts in your mind, with the way you intentionally and regularly think about your marriage.

Adopting a growth mindset for marriage is extremely helpful for fostering these intentional thoughts about marital commitment.³ Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck argues that the difference between what she terms a fixed mindset and a growth mindset helps explain why many couples build a strong, growing marriage and others do not. Those with a fixed mindset believe the qualities of their marriage are fixed rather than able to be cultivated and strengthened over time. Fixed-mindset people believe that if marriage is something you have to work at, it's not really love.

Those with a growth mindset, however, think differently. Dweck writes, "In the growth mindset there may still be that exciting initial combustion, but people in this mindset don't expect magic. They believe that a good, lasting relationship comes from effort and from working through inevitable differences."

Research has shown that those with a growth-mindset view experience healthier, growing marriages. And it's this kind of mindset that guards against infidelity.



For example, someone with a strong growth mindset might say:

*I'd never cheat on my spouse; it's just not something I'd ever think I could do. Still, I'm not so naïve to think that I could never be tempted. I know it sounds funny, but I make it a point every day to think about my commitment to our marriage. Sometimes I think to myself, **"Hey, don't forget the love of your life today."** I realize it sounds a little cheesy. But it's amazing that the more you intentionally think about it, the stronger you feel against any kind of temptation to stray that may come along.*

healthy ways to foster your commitment beliefs and develop a growth mindset:

- ✓ Acknowledge to yourself how marital faithfulness fits within your values, beliefs, and standards as a person.
- ✓ Consciously make your marriage commitment and growth a lifestyle. As one study directs, allow it to "mold you" and "be the lens through which you live and operate."
- ✓ Make marital faithfulness a daily choice. Wake up each morning with the thought that you will commit to your marriage that day.
- ✓ Regularly ask yourself, **What am I going to do today to strengthen our marriage? What small steps can I take to make my connection with my spouse stronger?**

strengthen your marriage connection

What are the small, consistent things you can do to draw you and your spouse closer together as a couple? This is what increases intimacy in your marriage – that feeling of closeness and “knowing” each other, that spark that causes you to think, *No one knows me better than my spouse.*

What a couple does to connect more intentionally has to fit in with their rhythm of life and what makes them feel connected. Here are a few ideas:

- ♥ **Leave love notes** for your spouse on the bathroom mirror or in their workbag where they will find them later.
- ♥ **Schedule weekly meet-ups** at the coffee shop, for lunch, or taking a walk in the park. Make it a habit and keep it **consistent**.
- ♥ **Do things that foster laughter between you.** Watch funny TV shows, play practical jokes, send funny pictures. Laughter draws couples together.
- ♥ **Do fun, new activities together.** Share new experiences. Be creative and open. A new restaurant, a new trail to hike, a new date experience. Novelty keeps things lively and fun.
- ♥ **Hug. Give your spouse smooches on the cheek. Hold hands.** Make non-sexual touch a regular part of your marital lifestyle.
- ♥ **Have routines and rituals in your day** for how you wake up, leave for the day, return home, and say “good night.” Healthy communication habits like these and texting during a lunch break or calling on your way home from work build healthy routines and keep you focused on each other all through the day.

These are only a few ways to bolster your marriage connection. Some might work for you and some might not. **The key is to play with some of these ideas, find what works, and even create connection strategies that are effective for your marriage.**

> set good boundaries

Boundaries keep out what needs to stay outside your marriage and hedges in what you desire to be kept inside. They provide accountability and build trust in a marriage.

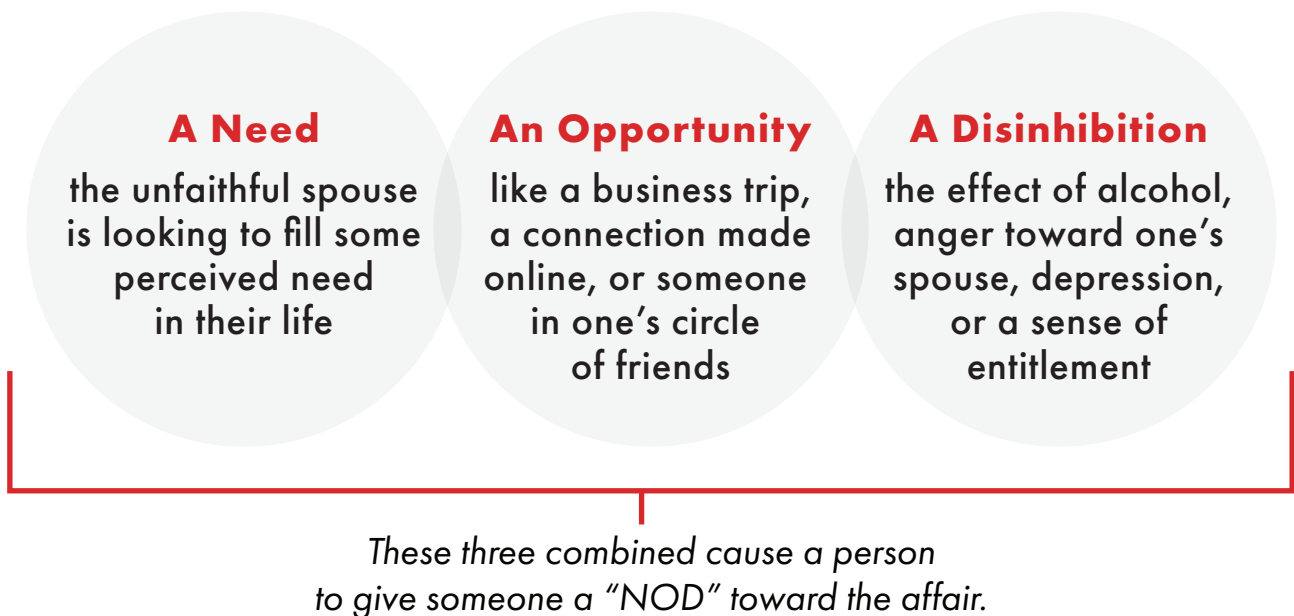
Someone in a marriage with strong, healthy boundaries may say something like this:

*Talking about boundaries with my spouse, about what kinds of behaviors are good for us and what aren't, **has really given us confidence in our marriage.** I feel like we're on the same page. I sometimes have to meet one-on-one with workmates who are the opposite sex, and just letting my spouse know who I'm meeting with and why helps us develop a lot more trust in our relationship. And my spouse does the same for me. They check in with me on work trips regularly. And we have an agreement that if one of us can't answer a call from the other, we'll call back as soon as we can or text to let them know we're in a meeting or whatever. That way we aren't left there wondering what could be going on. It gives us trust with each other. **The boundaries aren't there to "catch" the other person doing "bad;" they are there to help us protect each other and our relationship.***

boundaries in marriage provide accountability and build trust.



Psychiatrist Scott Haltzman⁴ writes that with every incident of infidelity, three elements are in play:



The big point is: healthy boundaries direct the **need** toward the right solution, decrease the **opportunity**, and lower the **disinhibition**.

healthy boundaries might include:

- ✓ How much time you spend with someone other than your spouse
- ✓ How well your spouse knows who your co-workers are
- ✓ Communicating who you meet with and why
- ✓ How much access you have to each other's technology
- ✓ Sharing with your spouse who you interact with at work or at the gym
- ✓ How often you check in with your spouse through the week or on work trips

One more important point to make: Good boundaries are **communicated boundaries**. Creating boundaries for yourself on your own only goes so far. Have an ongoing conversation with your spouse about the boundaries you need for both of you to feel secure in your relationship. Determine these boundaries together as a couple.

> practice healthy communication frequently

The importance of healthy marital communication can't be overemphasized. Communication builds intimacy, strengthens connection, and guards your marriage against threats, not the least of which is infidelity.

Communication is a broad topic, and there is a lot of guidance out there for developing healthier communication skills in your marriage. Here are some important communication topics spouses should, well, communicate about! **Click the button for more insight on each:**

*The key is to carve time out for quality communication and stick to it; otherwise, busy schedules and life stress quickly take precedence. **Make communication a priority and a habit!***



Understanding your **communication style** helps foster healthier communication with your spouse

Communication exercises are an excellent way to improve your marital communication

Understand how **poor communication** can affect your marriage

It's important to recognize and adjust **negative communication patterns**

Identify **keys to effective communication** with your spouse

Develop skills to **manage conflict** in a healthy way in marriage

make your sexual intimacy a priority

It might seem like common sense: Have *more* sex in marriage, and you're less *tempted* to have sex *outside* of marriage.

But making sex a priority is much more than keeping one's libido at bay in marriage. Sexual intimacy is *important* in marriage. Studies show that a couple's sexual relationship and their emotional connection are strongly linked.⁵ **Sexual intimacy builds trust in marriage because it requires an incredible amount of vulnerability; you and your spouse literally “bare it all.”**

A spouse in a marriage where sex is a priority may say:

*Our sex life kind of hit a rut after kids came along, and then schedules got busy... you know how it goes. “It” just didn’t happen as often as it did before, and when it did, something just felt off. **We finally decided it was best to talk about it.** Bringing up the talk was awkward. One of us finally had to say, “I know this might be weird, but I think it’s important to talk about. Can we talk tomorrow afternoon?” **It helped to schedule a time and that we eliminated as many distractions as possible** – the kids were at a friend’s house, we turned the phones off, and we decided to talk at home so we could be more open. And we were just really honest with each other and tried to see things from the other’s perspective. And it took **more than one conversation.** The more we talked about it, the better we came together on thoughts like frequency and trying new things, and understanding what our needs are, what turns us on and off, our expectations. Intimacy became a priority, and I felt us quickly get out of the rut we were in. And it’s funny – we also noticed we were connecting in other ways, like just flirting or talking together. Not to mention, it’s easier and less awkward to talk about physical intimacy now.*

while different couples have different frequencies and practices for sex, it's important for couples to:

- ✓ **Make time for sex.** Prepare ahead of time. Send the kids next door. Schedule it if you have to.
- ✓ **Talk about sex**, about expectations, frequency, what turns you on, what turns you off, what you're willing to try.
- ✓ **Have fun with sex.** Explore different ways of showing intimacy. Try new things (that are healthy, of course). Be adventurous. Sex can be a funny thing sometimes, so don't forget to laugh.

➤ **have other couples in your corner**

Research tells us that married couples tend to be stronger when they befriend other married couples they can confide in. These are friends who may be older and wiser – those who have “been down that road” and can speak wisdom into your relationship. Or, they may also be those who are in the same life stage as you and can share in both the joys and struggles of marriage. Either way, they are for your marriage and support your commitment to faithfulness.

having married friends who are for your marriage can be a powerful barrier to the temptation of infidelity.



What are signs to look for in friends who will be for your marriage?

- ✓ *They just get you. They have (or had) experiences similar to yours.*
- ✓ *They have insights to offer, and they are easy to talk to.*
- ✓ *They are encouraging.*
- ✓ *They're always supportive of you and eager to offer a helping hand.*
- ✓ *They have an objective view of your marriage; they don't automatically side with one person or another. They are rooting for your relationship as a whole.*
- ✓ *They express the same values as you.*
- ✓ *They aren't perfect, but they have a growth mindset. Their life is headed in a positive, healthy direction.*

There are also telltale signs that friends and couples could have a *negative impact* on your marriage:

- ✗ *They have starkly different values, and might even pressure you to do things against the values of your marriage.*
- ✗ *You feel like you have to be a different person around them.*
- ✗ *Being around them seems to make you feel more disconnected with your spouse rather than connected.*
- ✗ *They tend to side with one of you; they might see one of you as "the bad spouse."*
- ✗ *They avoid talking about marriage or relationships on a deeper level.*
- ✗ *They're not very open about their experiences, and talking about marriage just seems awkward.*
- ✗ *They have a fixed mindset. They don't seem to have a direction for strengthening themselves or their own relationships.*

Get to know couples you can be real with who will help speak life into your marriage.

care for yourself

The second main preventative measure for marital infidelity is nurturing your own mental and emotional health. As shown above, infidelity is often predisposed toward mental health factors. It's *imperative* for both the individual's health and the health of the marriage for each person to come to terms with any emotional struggles they may be experiencing, and then to find the most effective ways to manage and cope. **The key is trying to become a better version of yourself for the sake of your marriage.**

Caring for yourself can happen in two ways: self-care strategies and counseling. Self-care is anything you do to take care of yourself so you can stay physically, mentally, and emotionally well.⁶ It's done to maintain good health and manage the minor struggles that might come along. And the research gives us confidence that self-care works – it's effective for positive mental health outcomes.⁷

physical self-care

Get enough sleep at night
Keep up your physical activity and exercise
Maintain a healthy diet

emotional self-care

Be kind to yourself; use positive self-talk
Take time for yourself to chill out and relax
Journal your daily thoughts, feelings, and experiences
Say no to unnecessary things that cause stress

spiritual self-care

Become active in a religious community
Make meditation a habit
Spend time in nature frequently



counseling

Sometimes emotional struggles and the trauma of past experiences are too tough to cope with on your own. There's no shame in that; we all need extra help with our emotional health at times. A professional counselor can be an excellent source. They are trained to help others overcome and manage overwhelming anxiety, stress, depression, impulsivity, and other struggles.

As tough as it may seem, a positive step would be to communicate how emotional health or the pain of past experiences may be affecting your marriage. This is also an exercise in communication, trust, and vulnerability, all of which are building blocks to a closer relationship, not to mention a stronger defense against infidelity. *Talk about whether a counselor is a resource that would help either of you to care for yourself and your marriage.*

**Remember:
Small. Continual. Consistent efforts.**

There's a saying: *An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.* **The steps above have the power to strengthen your marriage trip for many miles and build infidelity-resistance in your relationship.**

to wrap it all up

**So what's that *ideal destination* for your perfect road trip?
Where is your marriage trip taking you and your spouse?**

When you know you're headed not only to a **wonderful** destination, but to an **important** destination, you are less likely to allow threats along the journey to throw you off course. You take precautions. You make sure the vehicle is in working order. You're alert. You do everything you can to *resist* the possibility of running off the road.

Couples who know they want to go to a **wonderfully important** destination in their marriage – toward a healthier, stronger, closer relationship, one where commitment and faithfulness are fostered as core values – are less likely to be distracted by the temptation of infidelity. *Eyes on the road, both hands on the wheel, keeping it between the lines.*

And a little bit of knowledge goes a long way: What defines infidelity, its *dangers, predispositions, and barriers* – the small, continual, consistent steps of prevention – **all of it is essential for building a resistance to infidelity.**

Because we're all vulnerable. Sure, certain personality traits or family experiences or struggles at home can increase that vulnerability. The research shows us that. And you need to be aware of what's at work within you and your marriage.

**keep your eyes
on the road and
both hands on
the wheel**



But even if there was such a thing as a total absence of all those factors (which there's not), **no marriage is completely cheat-proof**. Every one of us could make a terrible decision today, a step toward deceit and secrecy, that would send our marriage into a tailspin and into the ditch. *But we also have the power to prevent that from ever happening.*

I encourage you to commit to taking those steps toward infidelity-resistance in marriage. *Be on guard.* Create a lifestyle of boundaries and fidelity values. Work with your spouse as a team to communicate, connect, and bring others along for the ride who are for your marriage. The destination is before you.

And hey – *have a great trip.*



resources

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