

HIS NEEDS, HER NEEDS

When a man and woman marry, they share high expectations. They

commit themselves to meeting certain intense and intimate needs

in each other on an *exclusive* basis. Each agrees to “forsake all others,” giving each other the exclusive right to meet these intimate needs. That does not imply that all needs are to be met by a spouse, but that there are a few basic needs that most of us strictly reserve for the marriage bond. Most people expect their spouses to meet these special needs, since they have agreed not to allow anyone else to meet them.

For example, when a man agrees to an exclusive relationship with his wife, he depends on her to meet his sexual need. If she fulfills this need, he finds in her a continuing source of intense pleasure, and his love grows stronger. However, if his need goes unmet, quite the opposite happens. He begins to associate her with frustration. If the frustration continues, he may decide she “just doesn’t like sex” and may try to make the best of it. But his strong need for sex remains unfulfilled. His commitment to an exclusive sexual relationship with his wife has left him with the choice of sexual frustration or infidelity. Some men never give in; they manage to make the best of it over the years. But many *do* succumb to the temptation of an affair. I have talked to hundreds of them in my counseling offices.

Another example is a wife who gives her husband the exclusive right to meet her need for intimate conversation. Whenever they talk together with a depth of honesty and openness not found in conversation with others, she finds him to be the source of her greatest pleasure. But when he refuses to give her the undivided attention she craves, he becomes associated with her greatest frustration. Some women simply go through their married lives frustrated, but others cannot resist the temptation to let someone else meet this important emotional need. And when they do, an affair is the likely outcome.

His Needs Are Not Hers

When a husband and wife come to me for help, my first goal is to help them identify their most important emotional needs—what each of them can do for each other to make them happiest and most content. Over the years, I have repeatedly asked the question, “What could your spouse do for you that would make you the happiest?” I’ve been able to classify most of their responses into ten emotional needs—admiration, affection, conversation, domestic support, fam-

ily commitment, financial support, honesty and openness, physical attractiveness, recreational companionship, and sexual fulfillment.

Obviously the way to keep a husband and wife happily married is for each of them to meet the needs that are most important to the other. But when I conducted all these interviews I discovered why that is such a difficult assignment. Nearly every time I asked couples to list their needs according to their priority, men listed them one way and women the opposite way. Of the ten basic emotional needs, the five listed as most important by men were usually the five least important for women, and vice versa.

What an insight! No wonder husbands and wives have so much difficulty meeting each other's needs. They are willing to do for each other what they appreciate the most, but it turns out that their efforts are misdirected because what they appreciate most, their spouses appreciate least!

Pay careful attention to this next point I'm about to make, because it's one of the most misunderstood aspects of my program. Every person is unique. While men *on the average* pick a particular five emotional needs as their most important and women *on the average* pick another five, *any individual* can and does pick any combination of the basic ten. So although I have identified the most important emotional needs of the average man and woman, I don't know the emotional needs of any particular husband and wife. And since I'm in the business of saving individual marriage, not average marriages, you need to identify the combinations of needs that are unique to your marriage. I have provided a brief summary of the ten basic needs in appendix A and the Emotional Needs Questionnaire in appendix B. This will help you identify the most important emotional needs unique to you and your spouse.

Often the failure of men and women to meet each other's emotional needs is simply due to ignorance of each other's needs and not selfish unwillingness to be considerate. Fulfilling those needs does not mean you have to painfully grit your teeth, making the best of something you hate. It means preparing yourself to meet needs you may not appreciate yourself. By learning to understand your spouse as a totally different person than you, you can begin to become an expert in meeting all that person's emotional needs.

In marriages that fail to meet those needs, I have seen, strikingly and alarmingly, how married people consistently choose the same pattern to satisfy their unmet needs: the extramarital affair. People wander into affairs with astonishing regularity, in spite of whatever strong moral or religious convictions they may hold. Why? Once a spouse lacks fulfillment of any of the five needs, it creates a thirst that must be quenched. If changes do not take place within the marriage to care for that need, the individual will face the powerful temptation to fill it outside of marriage.

In order to make our marriages affair-proof, we cannot hide our heads in the sand. The spouse who believes his or her partner is “different” and, despite unmet needs, would never take part in an affair may receive a devastating shock someday. Instead, we need to understand the warning signs that an affair could happen, how such liaisons may begin, and how to strengthen the weak areas of a marriage in the face of such a relationship.

What Is an Affair?

An affair usually consists of two people who become involved in an extramarital relationship that combines sexual lovemaking with feelings of deep love. However, it is possible to have an affair with only lovemaking or with only the feeling of love towards someone outside of marriage. Although these types of affairs may also cause deep problems in marriage, my experience shows that they are more easily dealt with than the relationship that combines sex (usually very passionate sex) with very real love. That relationship threatens the marriage to its core, because the lovers experience real intimacy, and it meets at least one emotional need of the spouse outside the exclusive marital relationship. In most cases, when one spouse discovers the other has broken the commitment of faithfulness, the marriage is shattered.

Affairs Usually Start by “Just Being Friends”

An affair usually begins as a friendship. Frequently your spouse knows your lover; not uncommonly the third party is the husband or wife in a couple you both know and consider “best friends.” In another

common pattern the outside lover comes from your spouse's family—a sister or brother. Or you may have met your lover at work.

When an affair starts, it usually begins as a friendship. You share problems with the other person, and that person shares problems with you. Usually, for the affair to blossom, you have to see this other person quite often: every day at work or frequently through a friendship, being on a committee or board, or some other responsibility that brings you together.

As your friendship deepens, you start giving each other mutual support and encouragement, especially in regard to your unmet needs. Life is difficult. Many people become extremely disillusioned about their lives. When they find someone encouraging and supportive, the attraction toward that person acts as a powerful magnet. Sooner or later, you find yourself in bed with your encouraging and supportive friend. It just seems to “happen.” You don't intend it, and neither does your friend.

Very often the friendship that grows into an affair is not based on physical attraction. A wife will get a look at her husband's lover and exclaim, “How in the world could he be interested in *her*?”

The answer is, “Very easily,” because the attraction is emotional. It doesn't necessarily matter if the other woman is overweight, plain, or really rather ugly. What matters is that she has been able to meet an unfulfilled need. The lover in an affair often turns out to be regarded as the most caring person the wayward spouse has ever met. The straying spouse develops a reciprocal desire to care for the lover at a depth never before experienced.

When you become caught in an affair, you and your lover share a strong willingness to meet each other's needs. This willingness binds you in a mutual love that develops into a passionate sexual relationship. This mutual desire to bring each other happiness builds an affair into one of the most satisfying and intimate relationships either of you have ever known.

As the intensity of your mutual care and passion increases, you discover yourself caught in a trap of your own making. You lose all sense of judgment as you literally become addicted to each other in a relationship built upon fantasy, not reality.

Several factors contribute to making an affair so enjoyable and exciting:

- You and your lover seem to bring out the best in each other.
- You ignore each other's faults.
- You get turned on sexually as never before. You feel sure no one else could ever be as exciting a sex partner as your secret new lover.

What really turns you on, however, is not your new partner, but the fantasy. As you and your lover plan where and when to meet for passionate sessions of lovemaking you leave the realities of living behind. Your affair may go on for quite a while before anyone detects it. The longer it goes on, the more difficult you will find breaking it off.

As I've discussed affairs and how they start, I may have offended you, at least a little bit, by using the second-person pronoun. But I used *you* for a specific reason. While most people would deny they could ever get involved in an affair, the hard truth is that, under the right (or wrong) conditions, any of us can fall victim, if our basic needs are not being met.

It doesn't take something different or special to fall into an affair. On the contrary, sometimes very normal men and women get involved in one through a deceptively simple process. When your basic needs go unmet, you start thinking, *This isn't right. It isn't fair.*

Next you start looking for support and find yourself saying, *If only I had someone to talk to.*

From there it can only be a short step to looking for support outside your exclusive marriage bond. You don't necessarily go hunting for this person; he or she just turns up, and you find yourself saying, "Isn't it great how we can just talk and share together?"

In some cases the above process may take only a few months; in other cases it will take many years. But it can happen. I have seen it happening in the lives of my clients for the last twenty-five years. Sadly enough, it seems to make little difference what a person professes by way of religious commitment or moral values.

Early in my career as a counselor I often felt dismayed to see people with strong religious and moral commitments becoming involved in extramarital affairs. I am a church member myself, with strong convictions about the Christian faith. How could people who claim to have the same commitments go astray? Did their faith lack power?