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The Other Usual Suspects

There are other dynamics that can kill love besides hedonic inhibition. In our discussion, we're going to diverge from the usual "one size fits all" approach adopted by most relationship self-help authors. Human beings are complex. Human relationships are even more so. Many systems are hierarchical, interactive or both. It's not realistic to say just follow these ten steps and your relationship will be repaired. It's more realistic to understand what type of problem you have so you can more specifically target your intervention strategy. Understanding these additional assassins of love can help you do this.

Assassin #2: Attachment Neglect

Attachment neglect can kill love primarily because of ignorance. Many couples are not initially hampered by core shame or attachment ambivalence. However, they may still kill their relationship because they just don't know any better. This is a subtle dynamic because the damage is done not by something that happens, but by something that doesn't happen. An appropriate metaphor is that a person can be hurt by injury but can badly be hurt just as by starvation. Many relationships just starve to death because the partners don't know that their relationship needs to be fed.

In Chapter 4, we discussed how nurturing of attachment needs to occur primarily when partners are both in a free paratelic state. Many relationships deteriorate when children arrive on the scene and partners relate to each other only as co-parents. If partners share all their experiences as a family, then they set themselves up to lose passion. If they're smart enough to balance out their roles (sometimes co-parent, sometimes business partner, sometimes playmate) then they're set up to maintain love. I've seen many couples rekindle affection by simply restructuring their schedules to share regular private time with one another.

When relationships begin to suffer attachment neglect, relationship shame is usually accumulating as well. Most people don't want to admit to themselves that they're as emotionally dependent as they really are. It may not occur to them to tell their partner that they're beginning to hurt from loneliness and a yearning for more connection. That's why the accumulating relationship shame may stay unconscious. When a person no longer sees affirming signs that their core self is important to their partner, their shame of feeling unloved will build. This unconscious shame will usually begin to exhibit itself in the form of angry, critical behavior. It's as if the unconscious mind says, "If I'm not important enough to be loved then at least I'll prove I'm important enough to demand respect!" Consequently, partners may find that they're fighting about issues such as who put the salt shaker back in the **WRONG** spot?!!

There's a good metaphor for the fighting that often accompanies attachment neglect. When relationship shame builds up due to attachment neglect, it's as if humidity builds to one hundred percent in a room. With the humidity at saturation point, all it takes is a few cosmic particles to ionize the air to bring about a lot of condensation. In the same way, a charged atmosphere between partners will lead them to find some small provocation for a fight. Their minds will look for an excuse to act out their defenses to unconscious shame. Their angry defensive energy will condense into a fight.

The end result of attachment neglect is usually an escalation of defensive criticality. The bruising fights beget more shame, more inhibition of emotional attachment, and more escalation of defensiveness. Marriage counselors who naively focus on the couple's fights are hopelessly doomed. The source of the strangulation is far below consciousness in each partner's unstated fear. And the fear is that maybe, just maybe, they really might not be that important or loveable after all.

One hopeful point should be mentioned about attachment neglect. It's quite reversible if neither party is strongly inhibited by core shame. If the partners are merely ignorant, then they can be taught about what's really going on. They can learn to be more honest with themselves, learn to courageously express their needs instead of resorting to defensive criticisms, and learn to routinely structure attachment experiences with each other. Many couples experience rapid improvement in their relationships as a

result of these interventions. However, improvement becomes more difficult if either partner is hobbled by core shame as described with our next assassin.

Assassin #3: Conflict Avoidance

Get ready for some serious initial confusion about this one. We're going to discuss why avoiding conflicts will actually kill a relationship. Sounds paradoxical, doesn't it? But like many paradoxes inherent in human nature, it makes sense when viewed from a broader perspective.

First, let's be clear that we're not talking about screaming, cursing, hitting, raging kinds of conflicts. We're instead talking about integrated, tactful, respectful, **productive** conflicts. We usually don't think of conflict as being productive because many of us are so poor at it. But when we're good at conflict, our relationships are more vital and passionate. This is because well-executed conflict serves four important functions:

- 1. It rebalances boundaries.** When you confront intrusive behavior, it prevents your partner from establishing patterns of behavior that will degrade and shame you in the future. Healthy confrontation is sometimes necessary to prevent your partner from adopting a parent-like role over you.
- 2. It reinforces your sense of having a separate self.** The act of expressing disagreement and facing disapproval can actually strengthen your autonomy on a neurological level. Some ways are more effective than others, and we'll be discussing them in the later chapter about autonomy.
- 3. It prevents the accumulation of relationship shame.** When you confront intrusive or domineering behavior, you largely prevent the injection of shame into your system. When you shrink back from confronting such behavior, you allow the conditioning of what's known as "learned helplessness." Learned helplessness is the viscerally rooted perception that you're totally powerless in your situation. Think of it as a close cousin to hedonic inhibition. Learned helplessness is about safety and control, while hedonic inhibition is about enjoyment and

pleasure. Relationship shame is also avoided when you openly conflict and negotiate for what you want. This prevents the accumulation of hedonic inhibition that we've already discussed.

- 4. It allows you to risk getting closer.** Think of it this way. Would you feel as scared walking down a dark alley if you knew you were packing a .45 in your back pocket? OK, perhaps that's not such a great metaphor for the peace loving, but you get the idea. When you're packing well-honed conflict skills, you can afford to get close. You intuitively feel more secure. This idea flies somewhat in the face of the common belief that the purpose of intimacy is to get vulnerable. That's a myth. It just so happens that when we're intimate we're usually more vulnerable than at other times. In his superb book *Passionate Marriage*, David Schnarch makes the point that it's not virtuous to be vulnerable. People who are too vulnerable can't get close at all. They can't risk closeness because they don't have the protective autonomy skills needed when conflict and disapproval arise. I would add to David Schnarch's premise that the real virtue is to reduce our vulnerability in a way that allows us to risk exposure and love more deeply. In this way, well-honed conflict skills can allow us to get closer. And we won't have these skills if we don't use them sometimes. It's like the adage "Use it or lose it!" If we don't use our conflict skills, we'll probably lose our emotional intimacy as well.

Vulnerability isn't a positive trait. The real virtue is to reduce our vulnerability in a way that allows us to risk exposure and love more deeply.

I find that conflict avoiders usually fall into two categories. First there's the "consistent conflict avoider" and then there's the "episodic rager." Both can be considered conflict phobic, but they handle it in different ways. The partner who totally avoids conflict is more likely to come from a family where conflict was taboo. There was no yelling, screaming, or fighting. However, there wasn't any real exposure of negative emotions during conflict either. Everyone was "nice." The total avoider usually grew up in a family that taught them absolutely no conflict skills. Their family probably modeled suppression of conflict instead. For this reason, the consistent conflict avoider is just that, one who rarely expresses anger or risks a confrontation.

The episodic rager shows a different pattern. Their MO is to hold back, hold back, hold back, hold back, hold back, hold back, **BLOW!!!** Like the consistent conflict avoider, the episodic rager also tries to avoid conflict or feeling anger. But they'll blow up after the accumulated shame of their perceived victimization reaches critical pressure. Then it can be merely a small trigger that suddenly releases a huge explosion of stored up resentment. This pattern is the result of poorly integrated anger combined with core shame. Many of these people have experienced painful humiliation during childhood at the hands of a tyrant parent. Their core shame has been driven deep by these early traumas. But there's another factor that's just as pernicious. Their tyrant parent has actually taught them a perverted mental model for how to be powerful. This isn't to say that this is actually how they want to be. Quite the contrary. The episodic rager is trying NOT to be angry like his tyrannical parent. That's why he keeps holding back and avoiding conflict. However, when the sense of humiliating victimization builds to the breaking point, the closest template for expressing anger is close at hand. It's the model that was introjected years before. He acts like the tyrant parent he so very much doesn't want to be like. Afterwards, he'll usually feel a lot of shame for his rageful outburst. This generates even more resolve to never get angry or engage in conflict. Of course this becomes a recursive self-perpetuating cycle, the problem tightening on itself like a knot.

Both patterns of conflict avoidance, the consistent avoider and the episodic rager, can kill a relationship. The consistent avoider will lose his or her autonomy, stop taking risks, and fall prey to hedonic inhibition. The episodic rager will of course seriously bruise his or her partner while an atmosphere of fear settles around the relationship. For both patterns, the answer isn't for them to keep avoiding conflict. The solution is for them to learn how to use anger and other emotional resources so that they can skillfully engage in productive conflict.

Assassin #4: Enmeshment

To illustrate an important principle in this next killer of relationships, I'd like to recount an experience I had with one of my clients. She was an extremely attractive young lady, a successful dentist with her own practice. She was dissatisfied with her marriage and had unsuccessfully tried to get her husband to come for marriage counseling. I vividly remember the moment in our conversation when I felt the pull to become an enmeshed care-taking therapist.

“You look a bit distracted. What are you thinking?” I asked.

“I’m not really thinking about much. I’m just tired. I didn’t sleep well.”

“How come? Any idea what’s going on?”

In a remarkably matter-of-fact tone she answered, “Well, Jim woke me up at 2:00AM last night and wanted sex.”

“And what happened then?”

“Well, I tried to tell him I was too tired, but he said that I’m his wife and that’s something I’m supposed to do.” She shrugged her shoulders. “I’m his wife so I did what he wanted.”

Her manner was so resigned and there was no protest, no complaint. It was her resignation that was most significant. I remember vividly my own reaction. My blood started to boil. I wanted to yell in outrage. I wanted to infuse her with my anger so that she would go back and blast him! And then I started thinking about how I was feeling. I got curious. What would have happened if this lady had given the same resigned presentation in a therapy group? I knew the answer. Everyone would have reacted similarly to how I felt. Most people would have been halfway out of their chairs in rage. I could picture it clearly. Then I decided to play with the fantasy. Suppose she had told her little story to a group with a different emotional presentation. Suppose she had said the following in an outraged tone of voice:

“Do you know what happened to me last night? You won’t believe it! Jim woke me up at 2:00AM last night and insisted that I have sex with him. What gall! He even said that it’s my duty as my wife! That son of a bitch! How can I have a relationship with him when he’s such a pig-headed, fucking, chauvinistic bastard!

I knew the likely consequences of that fantasy. The group would take her side, but their demeanor would be different. They would be understanding, compassionate, approving of her outrage, but they probably wouldn’t be halfway out of their seats with outrage. They wouldn’t be trying to supply the missing piece!

So here's the principle. We all unconsciously feel a pull to supply missing resources to a person with whom we're identifying. We naturally want to complete the picture. If I were a more naïve therapist, I would have become her paternalistic protector. I would have given her detailed instructions on how to assertively handle every outrage her husband was levying on her. Instead, I recognized the trap and referred her to a therapy group to help her build stronger emotional resources and bolster her autonomy. Seven months later we had a follow-up session. She had separated from her husband and was proceeding with divorce. It was remarkable how her demeanor had changed. She now had an air of determination instead of resignation. Healthy anger was visible. As an epilogue to this story, I should mention that the ex-husband came to see me several months later, a full-blown five-star narcissistic personality disorder. He was able to acknowledge the nature of his disorder but continued therapy for only three sessions. Life on the beach was much more attractive and he moved out of town. Such clients rarely persevere in therapy. Much too boring!

I use this story, not because this couple illustrates enmeshment but because my own reaction illustrates the power of the dynamic. I could feel such a strong pull. It was so tempting to become her champion. We're all similarly pulled to complete the missing parts in others. But there's a reciprocal side to this dynamic as well. We can also be pulled to merge up with others who supply our missing pieces. If we're under-assertive, then we might be pulled toward someone who supplies our anger. If we're irresponsible, then we might be pulled toward someone who's super responsible. If we're disorganized, we might be pulled to someone who's super-organized. But the downside is that those initially attractive traits may eventually wind up driving us nuts! Where an assertive person may initially be attractive for their "strength," they may eventually be resented for being "pushy" or "abusive." Where someone seems attractive for their happy-go-lucky freedom, they may eventually be resented for their juvenile lack of discipline. Such is the nature of what's called projective identification. The missing piece that attracts you to the other person may later be resented as a royal pain in the butt!

Many relationship authors have written extensively about projective identification. Some claim that it's the major dynamic causing the most marital dissatisfaction. I disagree with this perspective. While projective identification deserves a place in our discussion of relationship killers, it is one dynamic among many. There are many ways for a relationship to go out of balance. Even the various relationship killers discussed in this chapter are a mere subset among many.

Caretaking is one type of enmeshment that is especially frequent. It occurs when there's an overdeveloped sense of responsibility to protect and care for one's partner. This may sound quite innocent, perhaps even virtuous. Except that several things gradually occur when this dynamic is perpetuated over the years. First, there's a tendency for partners to become polarized. As the helper

nurtures and protects, the less mobilized partner often becomes less and less responsible. The helper grows more parent-like while their partner acts more and more like a child. It's an imbalance that tends to grow more and more extreme. What eventually occurs is a loss of respect and along with it, the loss of sexual attraction. That's because sexual attraction thrives on respect and autonomy. Enmeshment kills it. Most of us can't fathom having sexual attraction toward a child or a parent. When a partner begins to resemble one of these, sex dies or gets thrown out of the relationship. As a result, affairs are very common.

Enmeshment can squash intimacy in surprising ways. The following situation involved a man who felt obliged to surrender his privacy for the sake of his marriage. Andrew was clearly the avoider, while Samantha was the pursuer. Samantha frequently complained to Andrew that he didn't spend enough time with her, didn't want to have sex with her, and especially didn't reveal enough about how he felt. She gave Andrew long lectures about his emotional shortcomings because allegedly he didn't share enough about how he felt. If she ever deduced that Andrew was hiding some thought or feeling, she pried and cracked him open like a clam! Andrew partly bought into this mandate to disclose everything because the alternative would have led to conflict. He couldn't face that conflict.

Andrew rarely felt sexually interested anymore. The boundary loss had been too great. One exception involved a humorous yet somewhat sad incident that Andrew described to me the day after it occurred. While asleep, he had dreamed a very steamy scenario involving his best friend's wife as well as his friend. In the dream, all three had engaged in some very interesting and unusual sexual activity. These kinds of images were not in Andrew's usual repertoire of thoughts. When he got up the following morning, he felt a bit guilty about the dream, but still found himself quite aroused. The arousal lasted quite a while as his thoughts turned to Samantha who was still asleep. It was a lazy weekend morning and she was going to sleep late. Fully clothed, Andrew lay down and curled up next to Samantha on the bed. Samantha apparently woke up and noticed that it was unusual that Andrew was curling next to her in his clothes. She asked him what he was doing. Andrew got flustered and inarticulate. And here's the important point. **HE COULDN'T TELL HER THAT HE WANTED HER!** They eventually got out of bed and started their day.

The following day, Andrew and I dissected the missed opportunity. It wasn't hard. If he had made an obvious sexual invitation, Samantha might have wanted to hear about what led up to his sudden surge of interest. That would have meant she might have caught scent of his dream. Once that occurred, she would have pried him open by stoking his guilt about withholding thoughts and feelings. He wouldn't have been able to maintain his privacy. Once the dream was out, there would be hell to pay. He figured it was best to lay low and not be forward. This incident illustrates an important principle.

Enmeshment can increase your guilt and vulnerability to the point that intimacy can't be risked. It does so by leaving you wide open to guilt.

**Enmeshment can increase your vulnerability
to the point that intimacy can't be risked.**

Guilt is the strongest glue of enmeshment. Even when a client has a history of complaining bitterly about a partner, it has frequently amazed me to see the outpouring of guilt and sadness when they finally “let go” of the covert feelings of responsibility they've been carrying. The day before I wrote this section, I was doing some trance work with a lady who had been working on anger management. We were using a memory of when she had erupted in rage at her sister while they were in a restaurant. Her sister had supposedly displayed some disrespectful behavior and I was having the patient relive that moment. With the client in trance, I was guiding her through the experience of letting go of anger and defocusing from her sister's feelings. I guided her instead to reattach to her own higher consciousness. Suddenly, I could see the flushed face, the trembling lower lip and the tearing around the bottoms of her eyelids. She blurted out, “It doesn't feel right. I feel selfish!” I replied back, “Good! Now we know we're exactly on the right track!” This illustrates an important principle to keep in mind. When people grow to the point that they let go of an enmeshing focus on their partner, they often feel guilty and disloyal. The price of leaving enmeshment is often a period of guilt and grief. These feelings need to be tolerated for awhile until the person can more fully consolidate their autonomous sense of self.

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Assassin #5: Low Level of Consciousness

Level of consciousness is the degree to which a person has morally and emotionally matured their sense of self. It's essentially how much a person has developed a framework of meaning so that they feel connected and a part of the greater world beyond their mere self. It also involves loving principles and ethics as a part of that world. Level of consciousness is a current area of personality research although the therapeutic community makes little reference to it. That's most unfortunate because it's a useful concept that can explain many problems in marital relations. For example, how stable can a marriage be if a partner tells lies of convenience? If they lack a mature frame of meaning where truth is prioritized over comfort, how can that person's relationship develop a foundation of safety? It will be hopeless. Low level of consciousness allows a person to grab all that they can without empathy for their partner. It also prevents the principles of equity and responsibility from giving the relationship a safe environment.

Neuroscientists have developed specific tools to measure and track level of consciousness. One interesting fact is that a person's level of consciousness can change over time in a quantum-like manner. During times of calm security, a person may operate at a relatively high level of consciousness. When threatened or shamed, a person may regress to a relatively low level. This is what happens to many people who regret their frequent outbursts of temper. There's also a general tendency for people to grow their level of consciousness over their lifetime. This is why we may consider older people wiser or more mature. Even though we have changes in our level of consciousness, we each have our own average level. Albert Schweitzer and Mahatma Gandhi would be considered to have high levels of consciousness. St. Augustine has been rated to have had an exceptionally high level of consciousness. Pure psychopaths or malevolent narcissists such as Hitler or Stalin have very low levels of consciousness.

My opinion is that level of consciousness is one of the most underappreciated factors affecting a marriage. Some authors approach this concept by talking about the "level of individuation" in each partner. However, level of consciousness is a much richer concept because it accounts for emotional growth far beyond getting rid of pathology. Couples with very high levels of consciousness are usually going to fare very well in their relationship. Those with very low consciousness will be turbulent because their emotional insecurities produce hostile defenses.

Measuring level of consciousness requires a precise scientific methodology that far exceeds the capability of this text. However, it might be interesting for you to get a general feel for very low and

relatively high levels of consciousness. The following two-part quiz may help you to re-examine some of your world views. This first section asks about relationship beliefs that indicate a relatively high level of consciousness. Answer *true* or *false*. It's best if you give your initial quick response.

1. _____ I never lie to my partner because my integrity and my relationship are more important than keeping the peace.
2. _____ I would rather lose a quarrel than violate a principle of fairness to get my way.
3. _____ I feel good when I tell someone they were right and I was wrong.
4. _____ I feel good when I compensate someone for damages I caused them by mistake.
5. _____ I believe that admitting the truth about my shortcomings is more important than winning an argument.
6. _____ I feel it's my responsibility to be respectful and constructive even when I'm criticized.
7. _____ I'll allow my partner to hurt if it's necessary to prevent behavior that's destructive to the relationship.
8. _____ I refuse to believe that I'm more worthy or deserving than others.
9. _____ I refuse to believe that I'm less worthy or deserving than others.
10. _____ I frequently surprise my partner with creative ideas for us to have fun.
11. _____ If my partner doesn't feel comfortable sharing a private feeling or thought, I want her to keep it private until she's ready to share.

This second section asks about relationship beliefs that indicate a relatively low level of consciousness. Of course the paradox here is that if your consciousness level were low, you probably wouldn't be reading this book. You also wouldn't be honest with yourself on this self exam.

1. _____ When someone else hurts me, I'll usually try to get even.
2. _____ I sometimes lie in order to avoid being interrogated.
3. _____ I often sacrifice my own rights to avoid my partner's disappointment.
4. _____ What my partner doesn't know won't hurt him/her.
5. _____ If I'm not getting attention from my partner, then I'll secretly get it elsewhere.
6. _____ I'll defend my pride at almost any cost.
7. _____ If my partner treats me disrespectfully, then I'm justified in dishing it right back.
8. _____ I basically feel that I'm more special and more deserving than others.

9. _____ My partner should follow my lead because I know the right way to run a household.
10. _____ Whoever earns more money in the relationship should have more say over how it's spent.
11. _____ I should be able to veto any of my partner's friendships that might be a bad influence.

It's interesting to look at yourself from these different perspectives. It's also very tempting to take your partner's inventory. No doubt there's some bias. You may wonder how your partner would rate you versus how you rated yourself. We all have blind spots.

If you're wondering how to raise your level of consciousness, realize there's no quick fix. It's a phenomenon that involves gradual maturation. People who have an attention deficit disorder or who reduce their frontal lobe metabolism with drug abuse will probably slow down their maturation process. Drug abuse may even reverse it. Conversely, we know that certain kinds of social environments can accelerate the process. Intimate radical honesty communities can *catalyze* more rapid emotional growth in its members. Self-help groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous use intense socialization of "spiritual" principles to perform this function. Certain types of group therapy can do the same. There's a neurological reason why this kind of social catalysis can occur, but it would be too technical and boring to discuss here. Just be aware that the relations you keep with others have a profound effect on your developing level of consciousness. If you hang out with low functioning sociopaths, you will probably remain concrete and immature. If you keep company with friends who are boldly honest and enlightened, then you will likely mature at a far more accelerated rate.

Assassin #6: Addictions & Compulsions

To depict the nature of addictions and compulsions in the context of relationships, a good metaphor is that of a monkey wrench thrown into a delicate apparatus. Broken pieces dislodge and break other pieces. Gears grind each other to shreds. There's compounding collateral damage in a chain reaction. Everything turns to chaos. Implied in this metaphor is that it doesn't make sense to analyze every thing that goes wrong. Just expect it to turn into an interactive mess. Because of this impossible complexity, I refuse to analyze a couple's dynamics when an addiction is involved. I'd just show how incompetent I am for the job. The appropriate sequence of intervention is to deal with the addiction first and the relationship much later.

There's another reason why the monkey wrench metaphor is appropriate. When a partner has an addiction or a compulsion, it fragments their personality into separate pieces like a fractured apparatus. This occurs due to neurological events. Both addictions and compulsions involve powerful reactions in the limbic reward centers of the brain. In the case of compulsions such as gambling or sexual addiction, a specific behavior triggers the release of opiate-like endorphins. The emotional payoff of these endorphins is so powerful that it outweighs the influences of logic or conscience from the upper cortex. The lower brain wins out and takes the most direct route to complete its emotional mandate: get those endorphins released! In the case of a drug or alcohol addiction, the drug either locks directly into the neuronal receptor sites or the drug stimulates release of the endorphins much like a behavioral compulsion. Either way, the lower brain takes control. In order to accomplish its coup over the upper cortex, the addicted part of the mind must turn off the dissonant circuits of logic and conscience. It accomplishes this by dissociating awareness of any consideration that might bar access to the drug or compulsive behavior. This dissociation is the central feature of an addiction or a compulsion. It's precisely as if the person forms a mini multiple personality disorder that breaks away from the main host.

For many people looking from the outside, an addicted person looks weak or stupid. Most of us don't empathize with dissociation. If you'd like to get a better feel for it, try imagining this scenario. Imagine that you're on some reality TV show where you're offered ten million dollars if you will hold your breath until you pass out. You know that your autonomic nervous system will kick in after you're unconscious and you will be OK. However, you will find that you won't be able to do it. About two minutes into the challenge you will experience an "attitude adjustment." Your limbic system will be monitoring your blood oxygen levels. When those get too low, it'll decide it's taking over. Your limbic system won't consider the ten million dollars; it will enact a temporary compulsion to get more air and it will overpower your upper cortex. What you will have experienced in two minutes is what someone experiences with an addiction or compulsion. It just occurs on a different time scale.

The time scale for developing an addiction or compulsion is slow and gradual. The first casualty is usually the person's primary relationship. It's not their job. Jobs are easier to maintain because they involve more concrete skills. An intimate relationship requires emotional balance which the addictive dissociation ruins. The drug or compulsive behavior becomes like a secret lover behind the scenes. Healthy love and attraction dry up. Curiosity and pursuit of mind grind to a halt. It's as if the addicted person's ability to love is being devoured by a black hole in the psyche. What makes this process so insidious is that the addicted person is usually unaware of what's happening. Many couples arriving for marriage counseling are in denial that an addiction is taking them down. They may think the addictive

behavior is one problem among many, but not the main problem. About ninety-five percent of the people I see with an early-stage addiction or compulsion are unaware of its hold. Denial is the norm.

While dissociation is the process that fragments an addict's personality, shame is the process that fragments their relationship. Addictions and compulsions are both shame generators. It's unconsciously shameful to be so dependent on a drug or compulsive behavior. It's typical for the afflicted partner to project their shame onto their spouse to get some immediate, temporary relief. Blaming, criticism, and emotional withdrawal are the result. Then the other partner's shame from feeling unloved, unimportant, and failing in the relationship gets projected back onto the addicted partner. It's common to feel one's self turning into a bitter, critical person. The shame ricochets back and forth between the two partners, shredding each partner's self-esteem. No one wins.

In the case of drug and alcohol addiction, there's another factor that compounds the destruction. The toxic effects of addiction will often degrade the metabolic functioning of the afflicted partner's brain. This can start occurring from as few as four to five drinks per evening or even three to four joints of marijuana per week. It occurs from various dosage levels for other drugs. With long-term drug use, brain tissue becomes less functional as can be seen on SPECT scans of brain metabolism. I encourage you to go to your favorite internet search engine and type in "SPECT brain images" so you can see some eye-opening images. Some web sites will display images corresponding to brain metabolism affected by drug and alcohol use. I think you will be surprised at how profoundly the brain is affected. It's also useful to know that the metabolic suppression may require up to a year of abstinence to fully recover.

The toxic reduction of brain metabolism is important because you need your brain for balanced emotional functioning. In the SPECT scans shown on the internet, you can view how the prefrontal areas of the brain are disrupted by marijuana and alcohol. These areas are particularly important in regulating emotional behavior. For someone who has anger management issues, taking these prefrontal areas off-line is like rubbing grease on your car's disc brakes. It's a disaster! Drug and alcohol addiction put to sleep the very parts of the brain that you need to manage shame and other difficult emotions. While the addiction is cranking out shame in the addict's brain, their upper cortex is being pushed off-line so as to be even less able to manage the shame. The process consequently progresses and accelerates.

Addiction's toxic effect on the brain has another notable effect. When the brain's cortex loses metabolism, it has less ability to reach higher levels of consciousness. In our discussion of Assassin # 5, we reviewed how lower levels of consciousness will destabilize a relationship by ruining the foundations of safety and responsibility. As a partner's addiction progresses, it's common for lies and betrayals to increase in frequency.

To consider whether or not an addiction or compulsion is affecting your relationship, ask yourself if the partner in question (it could be you) has failed to learn and correct any negative consequences from their behavior. Afflicted partners can show early dissociation in this manner. They'll look somewhat dumb because they don't seem able to self-correct. Despite a previous DWI and an embarrassing incident of drunkenness at the company party, they proceeded to have another drunken incident with the in-laws. Failure to self-correct and inconsistency with keeping limits are strong indicators of a problem.

If you're suspicious of an addiction or a compulsion but there are no obvious negative consequences, there's one more thing you might try. You might talk with your partner about your suspicions and contract for a six-month period of abstinence to see what happens. In the pharmaceutical business, this would be called a time series experiment. You get a baseline measure of the symptom before you do an intervention or begin treatment. Then you introduce a change and see what happens to the symptom shortly afterward. In the case of trying abstinence, you would evaluate what happens for the six months after stopping the drug or behavior. Does your relationship dramatically improve? Does the fighting stop after a month or two? Perhaps you might find that either you or your partner breaks the agreement. If the result of your little experiment is suddenly deceit and inconsistent behavior, then you know you're seeing the effects of a dissociative process. You've made progress by detecting and defining the major problem.

If you know that there's an addictive or compulsive problem in the relationship, don't try to fix it without help. This is a problem that requires help from outside the family. A mental health professional is a good bet, especially if physiological withdrawal symptoms are a possibility. Twelve-step programs are most highly recommended. If you're not the addicted partner, consider that you're still afflicted by shame. Attending a twelve-step program such as Al-Anon, Nar-Anon, or S-Anon is the best way to get your own shame levels down so that you don't keep distracting your partner from focusing on his own inconsistencies.

Assassin #7: Physical Abuse

This killer of relationships destroys the most basic foundation of safety that a relationship requires. If you are suffering physical abuse, then marriage counseling won't fix it. Your partner will need therapy that is focused on his emotional instability. If you're the one committing the abuse, don't think that your

“willpower” will be enough if it hasn’t worked up to this point. Physical abuse doesn’t come from a communication problem, and it isn’t caused by a partner who nags too much. It develops because the offending partner lacks sufficient integrity to be adequately stable. Let’s dispense with the myth that all problems are fifty-fifty in a relationship. Whatever problematic traits the abused partner may have, the abusive partner still has nonviolent alternatives. It’s their problem that they can’t choose them.

Let’s define what physical abuse means. It’s not limited to hitting, slapping, choking or pulling hair. It actually means any physical force being applied in an unwelcome manner to a partner. It includes blocking a partner’s movement, holding onto a partner, pushing, sexual groping, destruction of personal property, or threatening physical harm such as holding a fist as if about to hit. I prefer to include one more debatable item, the denial of retreat to privacy. If a partner is overwhelmed and wants to seek a private place to calm down, I consider it very abusive if their partner won’t let her. In fact, it’s quite dangerous to deny privacy. Many violent incidents occur when one partner tries to retreat from a conflict but is followed and literally cornered in a back room. Many animals can be dangerous when cornered. I don’t recommend a person stay in a relationship if the partner can’t be persuaded that each person has the fundamental right to privacy.

Physical abuse can be derived from somewhat different origins for different people. That is to say that their integrity may be fractured due to different reasons. Here are the three most common patterns I’ve seen:

1. **Malevolent Narcissism.** This involves perpetrators whose level of consciousness is so low that they feel entitled to execute physical abuse. There is no empathy and no real guilt. Their view of the world is egocentric. They are enraged that their partner isn’t obeying and submitting to their will. There’s no real empathy and no guilt. Their level of consciousness has not yet embraced the concept of respect for individual differences.
2. **Dissociated Physical Abuse.** This is much more frequent than pure malevolent narcissism. These abusers feel guilty about their abusive behavior, but they can’t stop it when they’re enraged. That’s the dissociative aspect of it. They don’t want to be abusive, but they become like a different person when upset. They have a dissociated self part and the experience of anger isn’t integrated with the rest of their personality. Many of these people have been abused themselves in childhood. When they feel threatened in marital arguments during adulthood, they start to feel the old humiliation from their unconscious childhood memories. To ward off these horrific feelings, the easiest escape is to grab and use what they’ve been taught about how to be

powerful and important. Unfortunately, that happens to be the mental images from their abusive parent. So perpetrators beget perpetrators and the cycle continues until someone decides to get help.

3. **Drug-Related Physical Abuse.** This situation can occur alone or it can be combined with dissociated physical abuse. There are many relationships in which physical abuse occurs only when the perpetrators are drunk or drugged. The person's intoxication impairs their frontal lobe functioning and reduces their level of consciousness. Adult judgment goes out the window and emotional impulse rules. A great many of these people can avoid violence if they sustain sobriety and let their brains heal.

A word should be said about the abused partner in a physically abusive relationship. The trauma of chronic abuse can seriously distort someone's judgment over time. After years of abuse, the accumulated trauma and shame will frequently train a person to believe that she doesn't deserve any better than the abuse. This shame can even lead to the misattribution that she's brought the abuse upon herself. The abused person will usually need a massive psychological support system before she's ready to risk taking unilateral action. A naïve approach is to prematurely tell an abused person to immediately get out of the relationship. A wiser approach is to first dig her out of isolation and get her surrounded with an advocacy support network. That way there's less chance that her ambivalent feelings will sabotage an intervention when she tries to make her move. This might include seeking a treatment intervention from the legal system or possibly separating for a divorce.

Assassin #8: Affairs

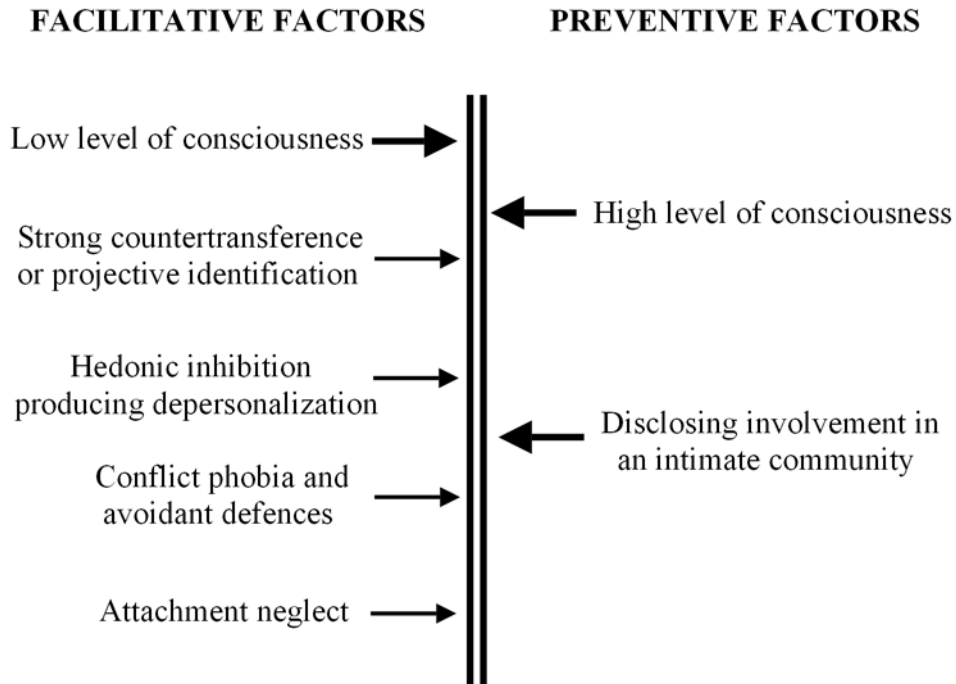
Many toxic dynamics in a relationship can't be neatly packaged as being a fundamentally separate and independent. The previously discussed "assassins" are more fundamental than others. The sad fact is that the fundamental assassins can combine and produce new dynamics that further damage the system. This is especially true of affairs. Affairs need to be viewed as a derivative of other factors in the person and the relationship. Ultimately, it's the responsibility of the person having the affair because it

represents his/her failure to manage the factors that eventually take them down. Many people view affairs as a simple phenomenon of falling in love with someone else. It's not that simple.

It's very natural for two attractive people of the opposite sex to develop sexual attraction for each other if they're in a conducive situation. If two co-workers are about the same age, are physically attractive, work together daily, and share their personal thoughts and feelings as "friends," it's natural for sexual attraction to start developing. If one person is needy for emotional attachment, then it doesn't take much to heat things up. A little bit of human warmth can stimulate more powerful feelings that can build with ever increasing momentum. In the case of our dangerously close co-workers, one person's developing passion can spark the other into an extremely powerful reciprocal reaction known as counter transference. It's natural to feel a strong pull to succumb to an affair. In fact, counter-transference is one of the biggest threats to therapists losing their licenses. Patients who "fall in love" with their therapist can exert a psychological pull that's occasionally strong enough to pull an ill-prepared therapist into an affair. Counter-transference occurs, even if you're a well-trained therapist. These are feelings, not behavior. How one manages those feelings is the crucial factor.

Think of affairs as the result of a battle between two forces. Instead of the usual good versus evil dichotomy, think upper brain versus lower brain. Impulsive gratification is driven by endorphin-releasing reward systems located in what's known as the limbic system deep in the brain's center. Mature judgment and ethical responsibility are heavily mediated by upper areas of the brain, especially the prefrontal cortex behind the forehead. It's the job of the upper brain to modify or overrule the lower brain's primitive emotional impulses for immediate gratification. The upper brain ideally modifies these emotional drives so that happiness can be maximized over time. When the upper brain rules, you protect your marriage and your family. You don't fracture your integrity and your capacity for close intimacy for a few hours of sensual gratification. Some neuroscientists call this "temporal integration." When an affair occurs, it represents a failure of the upper brain to mediate emotionally-driven impulses from the lower brain. It's a failure of higher consciousness, as well as a fracture in the integrity foundation of a relationship.

The following illustration shows factors that can determine the outcome of the upper and lower brain's struggle about possibly having an affair. Each affair that occurs will usually have its own constellation where the combined facilitative factors have overwhelmed the preventive ones.



Factors that influence the probability of having an affair

Let's briefly describe each of these factors.

High level of consciousness. This is the degree to which people have matured their view of the world and their place in it. It's not just a conscious belief system involving high morals. There are many hypocritical people who espouse high morals but who privately betray them. A high level of consciousness involves a viscerally felt relationship with higher principles of meaning such as responsibility, truth, creativity, and contribution. Level of consciousness is an area of current neuro-scientific research and can be reliably measured.

Disclosing involvement in an intimate community. Involvement in a radically honest community can strengthen one's level of consciousness against emotional impulse. This is one of the reasons for such twelve-step groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Gambler's Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, and many others. However, these are not the only intimate and radically honest groups. Some Bible study groups that involve self-disclosure can also strengthen higher consciousness. The early Christian movement's emphasis on small-group open confession probably had a profound effect on the rapid spread

of Christianity. Wherever it can be found, radical honesty in an intimate group can neurologically catalyze the growth of higher levels of consciousness. People who are emotionally involved and self-disclosing in an intimate community will usually behave more consistently with their most deeply held values. Their involvement bolsters the strength of their upper brain to down-regulate their more primitive emotional impulses.

Low level of consciousness. A low level of consciousness involves little consideration for values beyond narcissistic gratification or self-preservation. There's not much awareness of a broader context beyond one's immediate physical situation. There's little relationship with higher principles of meaning or with the greater world beyond one's self. Low level of consciousness is more likely found in someone who's been under-socialized or who's been raised by parents and influenced by peers who also have low levels of consciousness. Drug addiction and social isolation will usually lower one's level of consciousness. With regard to affairs, having a low level of consciousness is like having wimpy compact car brakes on a two-ton truck.

Strong counter-transference or projective identification. Projective identification involves someone trying to satisfy a disowned need by vicariously experiencing it in someone else. For example, a woman who's too afraid to exercise her own power may be attracted to a man who acts very assertive and self-assured. An inhibited girl may be attracted to a "bad boy" with a leather jacket and motorcycle. An emotionally inhibited, cerebral man may be attracted to the flamboyant and hysterical lady in red. Each of these examples involves attraction to someone who is unconsciously perceived as potentially supplying the missing piece. It heats up sexual attraction to a phenomenal degree. Counter-transference is the tendency to reciprocate emotional attraction. If a co-worker develops a crush on you, it's natural for you to feel a powerful attraction back. Like invisible magnetism, both counter-transference and projective identification can combine to create the unconscious emotional pull on two people towards an affair.

Hedonic inhibition producing depersonalization. This refers to a person who is unconsciously inhibited from expressing and negotiating what she wants for pleasurable satisfaction. This state can gradually leave a person with the depersonalized sense that "she doesn't know who she is anymore." Such a person will typically start to feel "trapped" in her relationship. It's dry tinder for sparking an affair.

Conflict phobia and avoidant defenses. When a person lacks autonomy skills and is too vulnerable to her partner's disapproval, she usually won't risk open disagreement. Instead, she'll use avoidant defenses such as compliance, distancing, nondisclosure, and lying. The problem is that this defensive behavior generates cumulative shame. Fear comes to dominate attachment, and sexual attraction gets eclipsed. The person will emotionally leave the relationship. Again, dry tinder is waiting for a spark.

Attachment Neglect. This refers to the loss of affection when two people don't feed their relationship bonding experiences. If both people merely work together and co-exist, one or both will usually start to feel unimportant to the other. Where there's no nurturing behavior or mental connection, the natural friction of living together will start to accumulate relationship shame. The unmet need for an emotional connection will begin to hurt.

There are different configurations of facilitative factors that can lead to an affair. However, some are more common than others. It may be surprising to hear that attachment neglect isn't the most powerful determinant of affairs. While my observation is admittedly based on a biased sample from couples in a private psychological practice, it's probably true of the general population as well. The most frequent correlate with affairs is that someone is experiencing autonomy failure. They're starting to feel trapped and depersonalized. It seems that affairs are more often caused by the loss of one's sense of self than by a lack of closeness. I see this in two most common configurations.

**Affairs are more often caused by the loss of
one's sense of self than by a lack of closeness.**

Low consciousness with hedonic inhibition. These people are starting to depersonalize in their marital role because they're living all the time in a responsible telic state. They no longer feel alive within their marriage. Life and joy exists elsewhere. It's as if guilt and shame have slowly calcified them into a dreary responsibility state. They haven't exercised and maintained the other joy-seeking side of their personality. Without higher consciousness to act as their breaking system, they'll skid into an affair when an opportunity presents itself.

Low consciousness with avoidant defenses. These people feel trapped and dominated because they're underpowered in their defenses. They live with a constant background of hidden fear. The opportunity for an affair supplies them with a way to feel passion again, but without the fear.

There are other less common configurations such as the partner who has a very low level of consciousness and engages in sexual trysts. No real attachment is involved and an affair doesn't take place within an emotional relationship. This is the case with sexual addiction where the motive is basically physical gratification. Another configuration is of a partner with low consciousness who is in a relationship suffering attachment neglect. The pain of feeling unloved may be acted out with someone who offers the missing attention and affection. However, this type of affair is less frequent than those involving partners who have lost their sense of self.

In all of the configurations we've discussed, low level of consciousness is a central factor. One might reasonably ask if any affairs occur for partners who have a high level of consciousness. The answer is "yes," but they occur less frequently and look different. The following case illustrates.

Gerald first saw me alone and had a remarkable story to tell. His wife, Angela, had asked him to seek counseling because he had been carrying on an affair for over a year with her best friend, a nearby neighbor. At first I was shocked, but the story made sense as it gradually unfolded. Angela's friend had lost her husband to a sudden heart attack, leaving her to raise their four-year-old son alone. For the following three years, Gerald had helped the friend by being like a loving uncle to her son. Angela had even encouraged him to take on a somewhat parental role with the boy. It should be mentioned that Angela's friend didn't have a steady romantic attachment during this time period so many of her emotional needs went unmet. The cozy arrangement with Gerald somewhat mimicked a spousal role and so naturally stoked affection between the two. The friend had a rocky history with drugs and delinquent behavior and was not endowed with much integrity. She finally completed the seduction one day by coming out of the shower dressed only in her bath towel. After this incident and a few more sexual encounters, Gerald struggled to pull away. The friend reacted by making threats that she would expose the affair to Gerald's wife if Gerald cut off relations. He felt caught in a trap.

What's most significant about Gerald's story was how he handled the final disclosure. He felt tortured that he had lost the honest relationship he had previously enjoyed with Angela. Instead of waiting to be found out, he voluntarily told her one evening while they were lying together in bed. He wanted to get back to being the person he used to be. Of course Angela was devastated. There were many tears and recriminations, but Angela decided she would stay in the marriage if Gerald agreed to go to counseling. He agreed and started seeing me shortly after.

When I heard Gerald's full account of the affair, it struck me how he had struggled to get his integrity back. He was not merely concerned about avoiding disapproval. If that were the case, he wouldn't have disclosed the affair to Angela. When he expressed how he was afraid that he might have a severe pathological defect, we examined how he had historically functioned and the circumstances of his recent affair. Instead of immediately concluding he had a severe pathology, we were able to methodically rule that out. Instead, it became apparent that he had naively put himself in a dangerous situation, had been caught in the grip of a powerful counter-transference, and didn't have quite the level of consciousness to avoid being sucked down by the powerful feelings. I later saw Gerald and Angela in some joint sessions when we reviewed all the dynamics of the crisis. To Angela's credit, she could see Gerald's integrity at work when he told her of the affair. She was able to mitigate her shame and trauma with what I taught her about how such a risky situation had quite naturally created the powerful emotions. It took only two months of counseling until Angela and Gerald were both cheerfully re-engaged and sharing affection.

Gerald's case illustrates what can happen when a person with a relatively high level of consciousness descends into an affair. They usually struggle to get back to their integrity. The observing partner is often able to notice this struggle, and the recovery time is shorter than with partners of lower consciousness. It's the more deliberate and psychopathic betrayal that mortally wounds a relationship.

The Affair as a Contaminant

Everyone knows how the betrayal of an affair can generate shame and distrust in a relationship. However, most people are unaware of how profoundly an affair will contaminate the judgment of the person having the affair. Many people in an affair will get caught in the trap of having their attachment split between their marital partner and their secret lover. They try to be logical by comparing attributes of each in order to determine which way they'll go. Unfortunately, this is usually futile. The emotional rip tides are much too strong for such a pretense of objectivity. The following case illustrates the power of these emotional currents.

Suzette was angry! Ralph's affair had been irrefutably uncovered in the records of cell phone calls and e-mails. He had been seeing the other lady for over a year before Suzette caught on. They had two small children and Suzette didn't want to give up before trying counseling to salvage the relationship. They arrived at my office in rough shape.

First, I negotiated with Ralph to agree to a firewall around the relationship to restore some safety for Suzette. He agreed to send the third party a farewell letter and to allow Suzette full access to his e-mails and other communications with anyone of the opposite sex. We next worked on several imbalances in the relationship that included a poverty of attachment behavior, as well as Ralph using avoidant defenses. As we worked, Ralph and Suzette's affection began to return. It even reached the point where both were freely expressing *in-love* feelings for each other. This positive status continued until I began to taper down the frequency of their appointments. Rather suddenly, they both came in after having had a week of terrible fights. He declared he was fed up with living with such a wretched woman and stormed out of the session. He never came back. Weeks later the truth came out. Ralph had covertly renewed his connection with the third party behind the scenes. The week he started the terrible fights with Suzette, he had already been back in the other relationship. It was remarkable to see the dramatic difference his renewal of the affair had made in his feelings toward Suzette. His growing affection for Suzette dramatically shifted negatively once he had restarted the affair. His different perceptions of Suzette were like night and day, depending upon whether he was in or out of the affair.

Suzette and Ralph were one of many couples who have displayed the same type of pattern. A partner's covert resumption of an affair has usually coincided with a dramatic downturn in the marriage. The partner having the affair usually has a sharp perceptual shift to seeing the partner more negatively. The logical conclusion is that affairs do not leave a person very objective about evaluating choices. One's evaluation process is hopelessly contaminated because conscious perceptions are distorted by the unconscious dynamics.

After the Affair

Whole books have been written on this subject, but we're just going to outline some basic principles.

- **Immediate trust is an inappropriate goal after an affair.** If you're the betrayed partner, why do you have any obligation to pretend you feel trust? Because it's the charitable thing to do? Forgive and forget? You have more important things that need attention, like truth and your responsibility to protect yourself. One truth is that an adult trust isn't naïve. It recognizes limitations and

gradations. You may trust that your partner won't stab you in the middle of the night. However, you may not even trust yourself with walking through a bakery if you're on a diet. Trust is about expectations of safety. If you've been betrayed, there's a reason why it happened. That reason has probably not gone away just because your partner feels remorse. It makes sense that you keep your distrust until you understand the cause for the affair and see its full remediation. If you've perpetrated an affair, then you have a lot of personal work to do. The affair signals that you had a major integrity breakdown. Whatever stressed you about your relationship pales in significance next to your failure to work within the relationship. If there was a lack of connection, then it was your job to confront your partner about the need for more shared intimacy. If your partner failed your wake-up call, then it was your responsibility to confront her about the need for professional help. If her pride prevented her from accepting professional help, then it was your responsibility to show her the brink of eventual legal action. If you were so conflict phobic that you had to lie and use an affair to get your oxygen back, then you failed to get the professional help you needed. The bottom line is that you have personal work ahead to become strong enough to take the heat.

- **Affirming distrust is paradoxically a smart strategy for rebuilding trust after an affair.** If someone were to tug on your outstretched hand, think about what your natural reaction would be. You would naturally pull back and resist. Tugging on distrust is like this. If you've had an affair, then your smartest strategy involves three steps:

- **Admit to yourself that the affair was your failure.** Blaming the relationship is an inadequate analysis. You fractured your own integrity. You don't like being a liar and a cheat. That's not the kind of person you've always wanted to be. When you are clear that you were responsible, then talk to your spouse about her distrust.

- **Develop a plan to get professional help.** Time passage is an inadequate plan. Your integrity failure probably involves one or more of the emotional dynamics previously discussed. Low level of consciousness along with conflict phobia and/or hedonic inhibition requires that you put yourself in a therapeutic or catalytic environment to get stronger.

- **Give your spouse permission to distrust you.** If you don't do this, your spouse will recognize how you're dodging the core truth of what's happened. She'll intuitively see that you're more focused on placating and manipulating her feelings than on assuming your responsibility to fix your incapacity. When you affirm your partner's distrust after the affair, you're actually reassuring her! It's as if your behavior is saying: "I know I messed up and I know it indicates a danger that I have to get on top of. I don't fully understand it, but I'm working on it." On a deeper level, affirming your partner's distrust helps you to feel permission to stop struggling with her mind. The resulting disenmeshment reduces your shame. It's a subtle benefit, but very powerful.

The time scale for healing after an affair will usually range from years to never. Some authors say that the relationship usually doesn't recover to the pre-affair level of trust. I find exceptions to that rule. When people do courageous work to radically change their relationships with themselves, their relationships can become stronger and closer than ever before. While only the minority of couples show this kind of courage, it is possible.

Time passage isn't the most important factor in rebuilding trust. Two factors are more important. First, it's important that the offended partner observe a profound shift in his or her partner's mind. We're not referring to mere regret. There needs to be an observable shift in the perpetrator's value system. Level of consciousness needs to increase to the point that the offended partner can see his or her spouse struggling to be a better person *for his or her self*. Intimate conversation is helpful to allow the offended partner this internal view. However, it's not enough. It's more important that the offended partner sees his or her spouse's new integrity tested across challenging situations. When this happens and the partner who had the affair has to voluntarily pay an emotional price to regain his or her integrity, then trust begins to rebuild. Telling the truth when it hurts can go a long way. A willingness to face disapproval for the sake of one's integrity may stir up initial resentments. However, it leads to long-term respect and the rebuilding of the relationship's foundation.