

Why People Cheat

by Dan Harvey

Scientists and mental health experts indicate the reasons can be psychological as well as genetic.



Odds against marital fidelity are daunting. In fact, it's a crapshoot, if results from a recent study conducted at the University of Montreal are any indication. Lead researcher Genevieve Beaulieu-Pelletier, a university doctoral student, found that partners cheat with alarming frequency: between 40 to 76 percent, and this goes for men *and* women.

Other research also suggests that romantics play against a stacked deck. Scientists at the Kirovskaya Institutet in Sweden report that some males are even genetically disposed to cheat. Their research uncovered a so-called "monogamy gene," or more specifically, a gene variant designated allele-334. "Anti-monogamy" might be a more apt term, as men possessing this variant are twice as likely to engage in behavior that creates strife in their marriage.

So, is marital infidelity as inevitable as blonde hair and blue eyes? Should women require prospective mates to undergo premarital screening?

That seems a rather drastic measure. Cheating actually appears driven by emotional bonding capabilities (or lack thereof). Behavioral geneticist Hasse Walum, the Swedish study's lead researcher, remarked that genetics is neither destiny nor an excuse for bad behavior. Essentially, genes don't dictate what will happen. Rather, they're an indicator of what could happen, and triggers seem to be environment and upbringing.

Similarly, during her research, Beaulieu-Pelletier observed that emotional attachments developed in adulthood are strongly influenced by childhood experience, particularly in a so-called avoidant-attachment household, where parents were frugal with affection.

Don't Blame Me—I was Raised that Way

Mental health care professionals who have worked in the trenches in clinical experience provide a more comprehensive perspective on why people cheat. For example, psychotherapist Toni Coleman, LCSW, CMC, does believe that some people are more biologically predisposed toward infidelity, but she adds that socialization is a more important factor. "Childhood experiences have greater impact than genetics," she says.

Psychologist, social worker and author LeslieBeth Wish, EdD, emphasizes the avoidance-attachment factor. "It represents a buffer against intimacy," she says. "People who have difficulty achieving closeness unconsciously sabotage their own efforts and one of the most common ways is by entering into an extra-marital affair."

With 30 years' experience, Wish has witnessed up close the alarmingly frequent difficulty people have in developing close relationships, even within the marriage context. "From what I've seen, socialization trumps genetics," she says. "Avoidance manifests in people whose parents kept affection at arm's length. On a subconscious level, they feel that closeness is uncomfortable."

Further, someone with avoidant tendencies won't fully comprehend or value a close emotional relationship. As a result, either partner may feel compelled to venture outside of the marriage, which only wreaks greater havoc.

Dark Tapestry

Mental health experts agree that there are several significant reasons why people cheat and these often intertwine to weave a complex psychological tapestry. Even Walum concedes that many factors influence how individuals behave.

Early role models greatly influence a child's later behavior, says Stephanie Buehler, PsyD, a licensed psychologist and certified sex therapist. "People whose parents engaged in extra-

marital affairs are far more likely to engage in similar activity. Research backs this up and, from what I've seen in my own practice, this appears true," she says.

Other main reasons include:

Absence of intimacy. Many people who cheat feel something is missing in their marriage, typically sex.

Lack of communication. Couples need to openly discuss their sexual life frankly and without embarrassment. When communication issues go unattended for an extended period, a spouse becomes very vulnerable to having an affair.

Perceived loss of attractiveness. Men and women need ongoing affirmation that their partners still find them attractive.

Compulsion or addiction. Some people need the "high" of a casual sexual encounter.

These factors point to a possible underlying cause: a lack of emotional development. "Marriage is never easy, as it requires a maturity level that enables someone to choose something like delayed gratification over immediate pleasure," says Tina

B. Tessina, PhD, a practicing psychotherapist who has written 13 books about relationships.

So, perhaps an effective alternative to genetic testing is simple observation. Watch how prospective mates interact with their parents (particularly males and their mothers). Listen for any revealing anecdotes that may indicate prevalent character traits. Look at the friends: Does the prospective groom run with a bunch of womanizers?

Of course, such observation takes time—but wasn't that the idea behind long engagements? Perhaps it's time to bring that quaint concept back into vogue. It could only help increase the odds for a successful marriage. ☺

Too Sexy for This Date

Ever heard someone say, "She (or he) is out of your league?" Hollywood has made plenty of movies with themes propounding that beauty comes from the inside, but research published in *Psychological Science* finds there may indeed be a universal set of standards for physical attractiveness that guide people's decisions about who to date.

It's hard to imagine the Web site hotornot.com having social benefit, but that's where the researchers for this study found their results. It revealed that people with similar levels of attractiveness tend to date each other, with the most attractive people being the most particular about who they would or wouldn't date. Both sexes want to date people who are more attractive than them, but men are pickier about the physical attraction of their potential mates yet take little stock in their own outbound appearance.

