



Transcript Episode 3: A Dangerous Liaison?

Clare

Hello and welcome to the Sex and Relationships Podcast. I'm so pleased you can join us. This is the podcast where we draw on our years of experience as sex and relationship therapists. I'm Clare Prendergast and I'm here with my colleague Janet Eccles. Hi, Janet.

Janet

Hello, Clare.

Clare

And today we're going to be talking about going outside your relationship, whether that's for an affair or non-monogamy. We're going to be talking about why they happen. What are the solutions and strategies that a couple can engage in to recover from the betrayal of an affair? So, Janet, my dear, let's start with why do couples find themselves in a situation where one of them has gone outside the partnership?

Janet

Yeah, very often by the time couples make their way to see us, they are in absolute crisis mode. And the affair has happened. It's maybe been disclosed or discovered. And then of course, it is utter, you know, relationship destruction and sense of betrayal and hurt and pain. And if there are children involved, you know, a sense of whether this family can stay together. So that's often where we work with people who are coming in

in utter crisis mode. And of course, part of the things that we do is start to wind this back and try and figure out with the couple why it's happened.

Clare

I mean, I do think just at the get go to put on the table that sometimes this happens in a relationship because the relationship has come to the end of the road. It's almost like a passive ending card. It's like, I'm not going to tell you I'm leaving you, but I'm going to go and play away. And the catastrophe that that will precipitate will deliver the ending of the relationship. It's incredibly passive aggressive. It's really disrespectful of the other party. But I think it is sometimes what happens. One party wants out.

Janet

It's the worst possible way to end a relationship, isn't it? I mean, it's a way, but obviously wanting to end the relationship that they're in is only one reason why people have an affair.

Clare

I mean, sometimes there hasn't even actually been a physical affair, as in some kind of sexual interaction with a third party. Sometimes it's what folk call an emotional affair. They've got very, very close to somebody outside of the partnership. And then feelings have grown out of that. Sometimes there's been a plan for it to become a sexual relationship. But then they've pulled back and realised what they're doing and changed their minds. But it's still in front of me working with it, it still has the same seam of richness and material as if a sexual encounter had occurred. There's been a recognition that one party has taken their most private and most intimate thoughts and feelings and concerns to somebody else, and it has left a rupture in the primary partnership.

Janet

As we've said many times, Clare, there's more to sex than sex. And just because the act of sex or intercourse, whatever hasn't taken place doesn't mean to say that it's not sexual, you know. And what's the definition of an affair? I mean, I would say the number one ingredient is desire. There is something that you see in this other person, or your attraction to this other person that gives you a sense of desire. And that's probably about I mean, we hear all kinds of things about, 'oh, I felt alive in a, in a way that I've not felt in years', or 'they woke me up' or 'I felt like I did when I was 21' or, you know, and I

think often that idea of desire is, also wrapped up in escapism when life gets a bit routine, a bit ploddy, ploddy plot. Here we are again. Kids. It's hard work. It's very difficult to keep that, you know, spark of excitement, sexuality alive. When you are, you know, you're dealing with the everyday realities of finances and full-time work and kids and, you know, and everything that that life is. And suddenly there is, you know, this, this bit of escapism that seems to be there, whether it's at work or in a hobby or the next-door neighbour or whatever it might be. But it's that escapism.

Clare

And through that escapism, whatever the mundanity of what's domestic life, there is an experience of being seen, of being valued, of being. 'Oh gosh, I do matter. Oh gosh, I am important'.

Janet

'I am attractive'.

Clare

I'm attractive. When at home. It's just kind of like you come in, it's just it's just toil and labour and feeling invisible and unimportant. So, I sometimes sort of put that under the heading, low self-esteem. Do you know, as a why these things can happen. It's, there's a vulnerability of not getting your esteem needs met at home. And then you go outside and get them met by somebody else.

Janet

Well, I think I think maybe I mean, yes, but I think also maybe you're being a bit generous there. You know, maybe boredom, maybe, actually looking outside instead of looking inside and taking responsibility and getting your big girl or boy pants on and actually noticing this as okay maybe something's not right. You know, if I'm looking at that person in the office, then what is it that I'm missing? And it could be low self-esteem. It could be that you're feeling run down in your relationship, but also it could be because it's easy.

Clare

And yes, and I guess I'm very much when I work with people in this situation, it's really easy to have the wisdom of hindsight. It's like to attribute low self-esteem or loneliness

or boredom, you know, after the event. It reminds me of the last time we met and we were talking about mismatched desire. It's the imperative piece in that is to notice and to talk. And this is the same. But sometimes in couples, it takes the affair to wake them up to the notice that we have a problem and we need to get talking. So, I do, I'm very disciplined about not getting judgmental around either party, whether it's the person who's played away or whether it's the person who feels betrayed. It's, I think both roles are important, and both parties will have played a role in this happening. And I suppose I do champion the possibility of life after an affair. It's, I guess I've seen it enough to know that it is a possibility. It's not a given, but sometimes it is the kind of explosion, really, that allows both parties to notice "uh oh. Things are not okay. We need to get down and dirty and get talking about what is and isn't working in our relationship".

Janet

Yeah, yeah. And the couples who are prepared to put in the work and the change and understand where they went wrong, those are the relationships that are going to become strong again and thrive and change and survive, you know, and sometimes become a lot better than they were before. Because I guess what comes from a rupture or a crisis is you're not going to take it for granted again. You're not going to just assume that we live in this state of being together forever without attending to it and without attending to each other.

Clare

So, before we move on, are there any other kind of particular examples we'd like to speak to around why they happen? And I'm just noticing one is rising up in me, which is there's a sort of growing visibility, I think, of folk who are polyamorous who love more than one person. In terms of why they happen, I think sometimes that first sort of recognition of I am actually someone who is poly, comes to light through what looks like an affair, looks like cheating, looks like a betrayal, but is. And within the context of the partnership, it is all those things. But for the folk who are engaged in this behaviour, it's actually, uh. Oh gawd. Actually, it's because I'm poly.

Janet

As you were talking there I was thinking about traditionally over hundreds of years, you know, the idea of marriage itself, you know, one man, one woman being joined together legally, man generally, until very, very recently has been in charge of the finances. The

woman is completely dependent on him. And has formed a, you know, a very important part of our societal construct.

Clare

Yes.

Janet

And what's happened as, women have had greater economic independence is, of course, they have also closed the gender gap in having affairs. It used to be men just having affairs, and women rarely did. Because men were the ones with the power. And there were these narratives, you know, these stories told about men aren't meant to be monogamous. Men need to spread the seed. Men can't be expected to stick to one person. But of course, what we understand as women have gained economic independence and economic power is that they are also having quite a lot of affairs as well. You know, no, nobody thinks that having affairs is having a good thing, you know, in the research that is done. But nonetheless, a lot of those people are having affairs. And I think a lot of that is to do with personal freedom and the lack of dependency on especially a male partner in a marriage. So then now you're talking about polyamory and of course, the idea of having more than one love. And there's this idea of sexual freedom now, I think it's greater now than it probably ever has been. We're allowed to explore who we are. We're allowed to be curious. But what that can do is if you have made a commitment to one person and there are assumed boundaries in that 1 to 1 monogamous relationship, and you then want to go and explore, say that your polyamory self, then you probably need to do that is by having the conversation with your partner. Because you're absolutely right, Clare without having that conversation and getting agreement and understanding - it's an affair.

Clare

It is, and it's messy. And I think just, you know, speaking directly to our listeners, you know, if you think you might fall into this category, we can't encourage you enough to talk about it.

Music

Clare

It does put me in mind of the situation where a couple have agreed that their relationship is exclusive, and they've also had conversations along the lines of if you ever cheat on me, we're done. And the one who finds themselves experiencing desire to go outside can tell themselves, there's no point having the conversation because I know what the other person thinks. So, if I have the conversation, then the relationship is over. I'm not ready to end my relationship because I really like this, this, this, this, this about it. And therefore, there's a rationalisation that justifies going outside the relationship secretly because the relationship won't cope with it. And, you know, hand on heart, I can say I have worked with many, many, many couples who have been in that scenario and have discovered that it is possible to not just maintain their existing partnership, even strengthen their existing partnership, even though they have committed this ultimate betrayal. Because actually, the time when the two of you made the decision around were exclusive, and if you cheat, we're done. You know, maybe that was ten years ago, maybe that was 15 years ago, maybe that was pre-children, maybe that was - do you know what I mean? It's like we live the present on agreements we've made a long time ago, and our agreements with our partners need to be revisited, need to be reconsidered. Do we want to keep this agreement? Do we want to modify this agreement? But just to be wary of finding ways to justify what is essentially poor behaviour because you are seriously disrespecting your partner if you go outside without consultation?

Janet

Yeah, I mean, you use seriously disrespecting. I would say you're putting a bomb under their lives, and you are causing an awful lot of hurt and pain. But I really like that question. Clare, when you are entering into this, when you are beginning the affair, when you are cheating on your partner, what did you tell yourself that made it okay for you to do that in that moment? And you used the word justified before and that is the thing. Because I suppose when we're being swept away with, you know, whatever it is, feeling alive or being seen or feeling seduced or feeling sexy or whatever it is that's got you there, then it's very easy to justify that to yourself and, and actually thinking about, well, they won't find out. So, what they don't know won't hurt them. But what a lot of people don't realise, and they do realise it by the time they sit in our rooms, is that having affairs are extremely stressful. In fact, they are so stressful that I think I'm right in saying that in men over 50, I think the risk of having a heart attack is massively increased because of the stress of having an affair. Keeping secrets is so stressful and

often in the end, you know, it's very common, I think, for people to be sort of leaving clues, you know, just getting a little bit careless with leaving clues around and, and actually, when disclosure happens, when, when it's found out, you know, and when you know, you say as a therapist, you say to people, what did you feel at that point, and often the first thing they say is relief.

Janet

You know, the absolute relief of being found out. Because I can't keep living like this anymore. And you know, Clare, what's really interesting after that is how the person who has been unfaithful reacts. Because if they go down the guilt, you know, responsible. 'Yes, I feel terrible, I feel guilty, um, you know, this thing that I did, it caused so much hurt'. But there is a sense of taking responsibility for that. Whereas if somebody goes down the 'they are such a terrible person. I don't know what took me there', blah, blah, blah. Then actually, what they're doing with that attitude is asking their partner to rescue them from it. Don't you be the one who went outside and caused all of this pain with your justifications, and then come back in wanting to be rescued by your partner. But if they take responsibility and say it was shit, what I did was unforgivable. It was shit. And the most important thing now is making sure that my relationship gets back on track. Then you've got something to work with.

Clare

And at risk of contradicting you Janet, I think even the most dreadful behaviour is forgivable, but it is that piece of taking responsibility for it. But also, I want to sort of include in this conversation those betrayals that are of a moment. So, the Christmas party at the office. The partners away working and an opportunity presents for a cuddle and a bit of reassurance and a bit of 'you matter'. It's a contextually delicious opportunity that has presented at a vulnerable time and you've taken it. But the feeling for the injured party, I don't think is any different. Whether it was an opportunistic encounter in the stationery cupboard at work or it was a three month relationship with somebody else, the feeling of invisibility, betrayal, how could you have done this to me is as enormous. And yes, if you as the perpetrator, if you then demand of the injured party reassurance and they're there of course I still love you. You know, I will just want to give you a slap across the face. Obviously, I won't but it's like, you know, you've talked about putting on your big girl or your big boy pants. It's like, come on, it's time.

MUSIC

Janet

In this sort of broader, more curious sexual landscape that we live in these days, you know, richer sexual landscape. You know, we know that there are many forms of not living in a monogamous relationship. And if you feel that you don't want to live in a monogamous relationship, then there are better options than having an affair. You've talked about polyamory, but of course, there is also an idea of consensual non-monogamy from a couple relationship. And I've come across this where a couple have been together, and they are committed, and they love each other and they don't want the relationship to end. But one person has decided, 'actually, I don't want to have sex anymore. I don't want to be sexual anymore'. And the other person does. And the idea of living a non-sexual life is not acceptable to them. Then sometimes, and no one's saying this is an easy process to navigate, but sometimes that couple can navigate a way for one person to get their sexual needs met outside of the relationship with the consent of the partner, which is very different to having an affair. And this may take the form of a threesome where somebody is in the room but isn't taking part or watching. It could be that it's a friend with benefits, where there is an agreement that there will be no emotional attachment, and if an emotional attachment starts to happen, then, you know, time is called on that relationship. You know, I think what's becoming certainly my practice, Clare, is that couples are grappling, would that be the right idea? So, grappling with the idea of one of them having a sort of a fetish interest or a kink interest that they want to explore and practice and the other person has no interest in it. You know, and that's quite an interesting piece of work, I think, to work through with the couple, because often the kink is just something that they like to do every now and again and doesn't actually affect the quality of the sexual relationship within, within the main couple. But understandably, sometimes the person who isn't into the kink feels threatened by the practice because they don't understand it, or they think they'd rather do that than be with them, which you know, often isn't the case at all. And so, for that couple to get to a place where that sort of engaging in that kink, whether that is going to kink events or looking at things online or social events that could be sexual, but they equally could be non-sexual. You know, and I think just understanding and exploring that landscape together for the purposes of, you know, what we've taught, and we keep coming back to again and again, this is about boundaries, not making assumptions. What are the deal breakers? What are we going to allow each other to do in terms of

freedoms? What do I need from you to feel safe? Good communication, commitment, all the things that are important.

Clare

Yeah. I mean, I agree annoyingly with everything you've just said, I say annoyingly because I quite like sparring with you, and I suppose I just wanted to add in the warning I wanted to pop into the mix was intellectually a couple thinking, 'oh, I'd be really interesting to open our relationship. It'd be really interesting for us both to kind of get to play away and have adventures. And we're so grown up and mature because we're talking about it and we're creating a safe context for this'. Is just that the boundaries and agreements that you start with may not be the boundaries and agreements you end with. Because engaging in extracurricular pleasure, I suggest for all relationships, brings its own challenges and pitfalls. And it needs to be a live, ongoing conversation whereby each time one of you burns your fingers, you come back, you talk about it and you tweak the contract. And there are many, many couples who are happily enjoying what back in the day, we used to call an open relationship. The partnership, the primary partnership is strong and they're enjoying. So, when we're talking about affairs and quote unquote 'cheating', we're talking about things that are done in secret, things that are done behind our partner's back. But we're just recognising. We're not only talking about monogamous heterosexual couples, we're talking about the whole plethora of relationship options.

Janet

So that idea of couples playing together, I mean, that's been around forever, hasn't it? And when you were saying that, you know, I just started to think about there was a thing in the 70s, wasn't there, about pampas grass in front gardens. Do you remember that? That if somebody had pampas grass growing in the front garden it meant they were swingers? And then I moved to an area, and I'm looking at houses that were built around in the 70s, and like every other house has pampas grass. And it just makes me laugh because it's, you know, was that actually a thing? I suppose we've always had to have signs to identify ourselves, haven't we? It's much easier because we've got the internet now and people can connect with each other and interests so much more easily. But I suppose sexual play, sexual curiosity, it's been around as long as we have. Of course it has. And human sexuality is a fickle beast. And if you try and keep it locked away in a box, it'll break out when you least expecting it and bite you on the nose.

MUSIC

Clare

So, I think it would be helpful for us to take a bit of time to talk through what to do. If you find yourself in a situation where either you or your partner have had an affair, and to speak to this more. I would like to start with saying really confidently, yes, you can survive an affair.

Janet

Well, many couples survive affairs if they want to. And yes, you can, but it's going to be an uphill struggle. There's going to be a lot of hard work to do. It's uncomfortable work. It's addressing pain and it's addressing what went wrong. So that's no walk in the park. And of course, a lot of couples decide that in the end, the relationship just isn't worth that.

Clare

But for those who don't decide that, you know, I think, you know, a really important first step is together to kind of really dig into the why have we found ourselves in this situation? And to really resist oversimplifying. I think there's a huge temptation to get into black and white thinking and goodies and baddies. And if you, you know, to be really careful who you confide in about this because friends and family will happily get on the bandwagon of 'they're a baddie', 'you're a goody'. How 'you mustn't put up with this'. 'You've got to get out of this'. And just to really be disciplined and resist that oversimplifying why this has happened. And allow yourselves to, yes, as you said, Janet, it is very hard work. But it's also very hard work to start again if you walk out on your relationship. So, this is brought you into a time in your partnership where you need to roll your sleeves up and get to work.

Janet

Every couple, every relationship will be different. And I suppose that's why it's very hard, I think, to talk in generalisations because you know, what each person thinks will be slightly different from somebody else. But I suppose the first thing is, you know, do we want to be together?

Clare

And I think, you know, when I meet couples and they think that or the person who's being betrayed is not sure and I'll always give them a finite period of time to be in their righteous indignation, in their hurt, wounded outrage. You know, that is a part of the grief process, and it's a part that is worthy of honour and time and attention. But if you really think you want to try and rebuild your partnership, there comes a point where you need to stop doing that. You need to let go and move into being collaborators on working towards building our future partnership and future proofing us from this happening again.

Janet

Yeah. And that isn't you know that whilst I understand that it is going to take some time, if your whole world has been shattered by an infidelity, putting a time limit on it isn't necessarily going to be very helpful that that person has to be allowed to express the pain and the shock and the sense of betrayal that if that isn't heard, if that's repressed too quickly and you sort of go too quickly down the well, if you hadn't have done that, then I wouldn't have done this. You know that I'm not sure how helpful that's going to be. You know, that person's got to be allowed to howl in pain and for that to be heard and accepted.

Clare

I agree

Janet

But in terms of how do you begin to heal? Then for me, it's acceptance and understanding. You will only reach acceptance that this affair has happened, this betrayal has happened, if I understand it. And once I understand it and and from that, that self-awareness of, well, maybe how I've been in our relationship has contributed in some form. But that absolutely doesn't justify what you did. But I understand how we got into a, you know, a sort of a tricky place in our relationship and having that understanding to then lead to acceptance. Okay, this happened and now we have a choice and we're choosing to make it better. And then the work begins. Whereas, you know, I think often partners who've been cheated on. Once they're dealing with the

initial hurt and pain, it's the fear of losing what we have, especially if there are children involved. And what sometimes can happen is that they will jump to forgiveness too quickly and that a cheap, quick forgiveness does not heal. No, you know, it's done in relief. It's done in panic. But the resentment, the hurt, the pain will still be there and it's not attended to and it's not understood. So, you know, I, I always sort of, try not to use the word forgiveness. I much prefer understanding and acceptance.

Clare

Lovely, lovely. And I and I'm thinking as well, sometimes it might seem a bit extreme this, but you know, when you talk about howling in pain, I think there's sometimes is a place for the injured party to have some individual grief counselling and sometimes a betrayal just touches on old wounds from previous betrayals, whether by previous partners or caring parental figures. And, and there's just a mine of material for that person to work on that is different to the work that we're doing with me around relationship building.

Janet

Yeah. And, um, what we learn systemically, i.e. within our family systems about trust in relationships is so important. Do you know that if we grew up watching a parental relationship where, we didn't see a lot of intimacy, we didn't see, you know, a lot of our parents working together and being emotionally close. But what we did see was one of our parents being let down or, you know, somebody consistently having affairs or actually leaving the family for somebody else, or, you know, on a rare occasion of, you know, finding out that that one of their parents has actually got two families, uh, you know, on the go at the same time, which, you know, I don't think is a rare as you might think. But it's what we grew up with systemically in our families about how we do trust in a relationship. And of course, what we know is that some people are fearful of committing wholly. Some people are fearful of intimate, monogamous, close, one on one relationships and, and sometimes need some sort of blocker or breaker in that exclusive twosome just to, you know, give a, give a bit more breathing space because actually the idea of, you know, literally throwing all your eggs in, one basket with one person, you put your whole life security in with one person. It's just too much. It just makes that person feel too vulnerable.

Janet

And so, what can be quite common is, you know, and sometimes this is done not really understanding the full reason of why they're doing, it is that there may be a lot of flirting going on or there may be, you know, an ongoing affair or close friendship or whatever it might be whilst in a primary relationship. We in Relate terms, we used to call that the third leg of the stool, that actually if you take the third leg away of the stool away, the stool falls over because there is something that is needed to create an intimacy blocker. And I suppose if you grew up not trusting and your expectation of relationships is that, well, they're not really faithful, they're not really without betrayals and affairs, then then you're not going to trust wholly as an adult.

Clare

And, you know, looping back to my point about future proofing, if you have come to see that as you, that you actually are incapable of trust because of your backstory, then you are complicit in the cheating because you are setting up your partner to betray you. Because they know they're not trusted. Do you see what I mean? So, it's this back and forthness of the responsibility for how we create a container together that is trustworthy, that is safe. And through building that together, how we learn to talk about our respective vulnerabilities from our back stories, from our coping mechanisms that we've cooked up to make vulnerability tolerable and keep talking and grow together and not sort of taking it off and finding solutions by myself that exclude you. And then basically compound this, this leaking trust bucket till the end of time.

Janet

You say complicit. But I think I would like to add unwittingly.

Clare

Unwittingly, 100% unwittingly complicit. Thank you for that. Because we don't want to afford blame. It's like I think very few people find themselves in this situation because they're an asshole and they're wanting to create a train crash. Most people who find themselves trying to cope with after an affair are nice people who've got themselves into a pickle. And let's try and sort it out. And I think, Janet, one more time. The more we've talked, the more sort of light bulbs are going off in me around, oh, let's do an episode on fetishes. Oh, let's do an episode on trust. Oh, let's do a..... you know, there's so much material here for us to keep talking about. But I wonder if for today, we've come to the end.

Janet

Have you had enough of affairs for today, Clare? Are you exhausted? Is it the stress?

Clare

You know, I don't know I could honestly say yes to that. I think I could keep talking, but I'm thinking about you, our dear, dear, lovely listeners. And I think you've probably had enough for today.

Clare

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Janet:

Bye, bye Clare.