

I HAD AN

# Affair



GETTY

# THESE ARE WORDS NO WOMAN WANTS TO HEAR. YET THEY TUMBLE FORTH EVERY DAY, WREAKING HAVOC AND CRUSHING HEARTS WHEREVER THEY LAND.

Could you – or your relationship – survive that sentence? Meet three women who, in their own way, bore the words with courage and learned to pick themselves up and move forward again.

by ANNE BOKMA



## **SANDRA BARRETT\* HAD WHAT SHE**

considered to be not just a good marriage but a great one. She and her husband, Bill, laughed together every day and had two kids they doted on. Bill shared the chores and childrearing, planned trips for the family and often wrote her poetry. After 17 years of marriage, they still had sex regularly.

But earlier last year, things suddenly changed. Her formerly attentive husband started going on more business trips and, when home, was becoming emotionally distant and spending an inordinate amount of time texting.

She suspected he was having an affair and confronted him repeatedly.

He denied it – repeatedly.

He accused her of being paranoid, which led her to seek counselling to deal with what she assumed was misguided jealousy. “He had me convinced it was all in my head,” says Barrett, a 51-year-old nurse practitioner in Ottawa.

Then she found the love letter; penned by her husband to a woman he’d reconnected with from his past.

Finally, her husband confessed: He’d been having an affair for six months. He loved the woman, who was also married, and wanted to be with her just as soon as she left her husband. In the meantime, he suggested he live in the basement until they sorted things out. “He wanted to keep the affair a secret and tried to convince me this would be better for the kids.” But Barrett wanted none of it. She asked him to leave. He did.

The next three months were agony. Barrett could barely eat or sleep. The fallout of infidelity, she soon realized, is that it chips away at you incessantly. “You question your whole marriage. It eats away at your sense of reality.”

One dark night, thoughts of suicide entered her head.

But she didn’t go there. Barrett knew she had to take the same advice she had given to her patients who had been devastated by a partner’s affair: Take care of yourself first. She took antidepressants by day to deal with the raging sadness and sleeping pills at night to get some much needed sleep. She took up running and meditation, kept a daily journal and sought professional counselling for herself and her kids. Because she was so preoccupied with the emotional pain of her marriage breakdown, she cut back at work. “I felt cognitively impaired, and I knew I was at risk of making mistakes with my patients.” She took a month’s leave and then went back to work half-time for several months. All the while, she has kept her children front and centre: Having to care for them has enabled her to get through the ordeal, she says.

And talking has helped. Because her friends and family knew what happened, other women confided their own stories of infidelity, which made her feel less alone. Almost a year on, Barrett believes the worst of the pain may be over.

**Words of wisdom:** “I needed to take care of myself. I know that by doing all these things, somehow I will heal from this.”



Q: WOULD YOU TAKE YOUR PARTNER BACK AFTER AN AFFAIR? WHY OR WHY NOT? JOIN THE CONVERSATION ON OUR FACEBOOK PAGE.



## together BUT APART

Barbara Samuel\* always believed no woman should live with a man who cheats. But when she found an email her husband of 20 years had written to a colleague he'd been having a two-year affair with, the decision to leave wasn't as simple as she had imagined.

She considered selling her Toronto home and moving into an apartment with her 10-year-old daughter, but reality crashed around her. Moving would mean her daughter would have to shuttle back and forth between her parents. In addition, Samuel would have to carry her household on her single salary. "Separation seemed easier said than done. I was an independent woman of 45, but I felt as trapped as a '50s housewife."

Her husband ended the affair immediately, asked for forgiveness and promised to work on their marriage. She and her husband went into counselling for six months, but today, five years later, the infidelity lingers around the rim of their relationship.

"He's a good father and, after surviving the pain of that first year, I was able to move on. But I'd be lying if I said I feel the same about him as I used to." She describes their relationship as "amicable roommates" – they share the household chores, both contribute financially to the family coffers, focus on their daughter and even cuddle together on the couch watching TV. But that's where the coupling ends. Their sex life has died.

Samuel is unsure about the future and acknowledges separa-

tion may be a possibility when her now 15-year-old daughter leaves home. "My parents were divorced, and I know what that can do to kids. I'm able to live like this because I don't hate my husband – I can even understand how, after years of monogamy, a partner might stray. But I feel our marriage has a crack in it – that it may be forever fractured – so I try to do things that make me happy."

That includes finding ways to assert her independence, taking up new activities, such as joining a golf club and hiking group, and looking to her girlfriends for emotional connection.

**Words of wisdom:** "I used to think of my husband as my rock, but I came to realize that I have to be my own rock."

## reunited, AND IT FEELS SO GOOD

When Emily Ross\* married her husband, Brian, 18 years ago, she told him she'd leave him if he ever cheated. Then, five months ago, Ross received an email at work from a woman who said she'd been having an affair with her husband and that it had been going on for two years. Turns out, Brian had just ended the affair and the woman was now getting her revenge by letting Ross in on the secret.

Ross, a 43-year-old Vancouver banker and mother of two, admits her marriage had been unhappy for years. She takes some of the blame for that – a miserable childhood left her with a bleak outlook on life. "I wasn't happy with myself and it took a toll on our marriage. I recognized I needed help." A few months before finding out about her husband's affair, she had signed up for an intensive weekend women's retreat that was transformative: It allowed her to unblock angry and hurt feelings caused by past betrayals and relationship failures. "It freed me from my negative past and my low self-worth. For the first time in my life, I started to feel good about myself." Her new attitude also started to improve her marriage, which, in turn, caused Brian to end his affair.

"I think if I hadn't gone to that retreat and gotten the heal-

# 5 THINGS YOU MAY NOT KNOW ABOUT INFIDELITY

**1. IT'S MORE COMMON THAN YOU THINK** Despite near universal disapproval of cheating, it occurs with remarkable regularity. While statistics vary widely, they generally indicate that 20 to 50 percent of men and 15 to 30 percent of women have extramarital affairs. These numbers have remained consistent over time: American researcher Alfred Kinsey found

in his 1950s-era studies that 50 percent of American males and 26 percent of females had extramarital sex. This appears to be unchanged over the decades.

**2. HAPPILY MARRIED PEOPLE HAVE AFFAIRS** A study by Helen Fisher, a biological anthropologist at Rutgers University in New Jersey, found 56 percent of men and 34 percent of women who

had affairs rated their marriage as "happy" or "very happy."

**3. THE GENDER GAP ON AFFAIRS IS CLOSING** Women are 40 percent more likely to cheat today than they were 20 years ago, according to the Chicago-based National Opinion Research Centre. Some blame the Internet, which makes it easier than ever for women to embark on outside relationships.

GETTY

ing I needed, my husband's affair would have destroyed me," says Ross.

Wanting to preserve their union, the pair signed up for a couple's retreat with the same counsellor, whom they credit with bringing them closer together. "Brian has completely recommitted to me. I have forgiven him, even though I still need more time to heal completely." The couple has brought romance and tenderness back into their daily lives: They now greet each other with a hug at the door when they get home from work, take the time to send loving emails to each other and have planned a cruise for just the two of them, without their two teenage kids.

Their sex life, which had flagged for years, is now robust. "Brian is more attentive than he ever used to be. He has learned to be a better communicator, and I have, too."

**Words of wisdom:** "I realize I never knew how to express my emotions because I simply wasn't allowed to when I was a kid. I've lived 18 years with this man and built a life with him. We have two kids and he's a good father and a good person, but, just like me – like anyone – he has his faults. The important thing is he understands those faults and is dealing with the mistake he made. Knowing that he's doing this has made my decision to stay with him so much easier." *HR*

*\*Names have been changed to protect privacy*

---

**4. MEN WANT SEX, WOMEN WANT LOVE** According to a May 2012 study by Undercover Lovers, a U.K.-based extramarital dating site, 57 percent of women reported feeling love for their affair partner, while only 27 percent of the men said the same.

**5. IT COULD BE IN THE GENES** Cheating may be genetically predetermined. A 2010 study from New York's Binghamton University links the dopamine receptor D4 (also connected to sensation-seeking behaviour such as alcohol use and gambling) with infidelity.

## *after an affair* **DO'S AND DON'TS**

---

Grace Cirocco, a relationship and wellness coach in St. Catharines, Ont., who runs marriage retreats for couples, and Dr. Janis Abrahms Spring, a psychologist in Westport, Conn., and author of *After the Affair: Healing the Pain and Rebuilding Trust When a Partner Has Been Unfaithful*, offer the following advice for women whose partners have had an affair.

### **DON'T**

#### **ASK FOR INTIMATE DETAILS**

You may be curious about what the sex was like, how often they did it or if he gave her gifts. "It can drive a woman crazy knowing this sort of stuff – it feeds her imagination, she obsesses about it and it can block healing," says Cirocco.

#### **MAKE ANY IMMEDIATE DECISIONS**

Give yourself time to process what's happened before you make any key decisions. If you decide to stay together and are working to restabilize, you should still expect your relationship to be an emotional roller-coaster for about 18 months, says Dr. Abrahms Spring. "You have to move past the anniversary of the disclosure date. During that time, you can expect plenty of turbulence."

#### **ASSUME IT HAS TO MEAN THE END OF YOUR MARRIAGE**

Some marriages actually thrive after the affair because the couple realizes what they might have lost and work harder to regain intimacy. But the unfaithful partner must ask for, and earn, forgiveness. Says Cirocco: "If the marriage is going to make it, both parties need to be honest about their feelings and take responsibility for repairing the disconnect that led to the infidelity. Patience is key. Wounds take time to heal, but trust can be rebuilt."

### **DO**

#### **RECOGNIZE YOU MAY NEED PROFESSIONAL HELP**

The discovery of an affair is a psychological trauma, says Dr. Abrahms Spring. "Hurt partners are often embarrassed by how badly they are doing, how shattered they feel and how traumatized they are. They need to understand that this is a normal and common response."

**ENGAGE LIFE** "Remember the saying 'You make a road by walking' – that means starting to re-engage, even if you have no real interest in doing so. Call a friend, go to a class at the gym and get outside for a power walk," says Dr. Abrahms Spring. "This allows you to begin receiving feedback about yourself – that you aren't alone, that you are a person worthy of being cared for, and you begin to experience yourself as being alive and in this world."

#### **EXAMINE YOUR OWN BEHAVIOUR**

Both parties need to take responsibility for problems in the marriage. "This doesn't mean you blame yourself for your partner's affair, but you must be willing to take your fair share of responsibility – whether that's 10 or 50 percent – for what created the distance between the two of you and made room for a third party to come between you," says Dr. Abrahms Spring.