

Many betrayed wives feel an impulsive urge to confront the other woman. They hope to scare her, intimidate her, or convince her to "Leave my husband alone!" For some, it is a passing thought. For others it's an obsession—particularly when the other woman persists in contacting the man and keeping the affair alive. There are times when confronting the other woman may be helpful. More often than not it only complicates the situation. But you can weaken the love triangle without directly attacking the other woman.

Even if you have no desire to confront the other woman, this chapter will provide more clues as to what makes you tick and what keeps love triangles operating long after they should have disintegrated. Your real power comes from within—understanding yourself and your situation—so you can make sound choices and operate from personal integrity. (Unless you wish to save your marriage but lose yourself in the process.)

Emotional Triangles

A "love triangle" is a common term used to describe an affair. Then the drama unfolds: secrecy followed by exposure followed by the push-pull of competing desires—and all of the emotional damage (usually extensive) that results.

Step back from the concept of "love triangles" and look instead at what therapists call "emotional triangles." A love triangle is a special kind of emotional triangle. But all emotional triangles operate according to a certain set of rules. If you understand those rules, you will know what steps to take. If you do not understand the rules, you will probably make your situation worse. (When it

comes to dealing with emotional triangles, ignorance is not bliss.) There are five main rules you need to understand about emotional triangles:

1. They form when the anxiety or tension between two people gets too high.
2. They tend to make underlying problems persist, not change.
3. At any moment in time, two people in the triangle are more connected and the other is on the outside.
4. Trying to directly force the other two people in the triangle to break up usually strengthens their bond.
5. If you try and fail to break up the other two, you will take on more of their stress and they will feel more at ease.

They Form When the Anxiety or Tension Between Two People Gets Too High

Emotional triangles exist everywhere in your life. A triangle forms when the level of anxiety (distress, discomfort, unease, pain, and so forth) between two people rises to a tipping point for at least one of those persons. Then that person "triangles in" a third person (or thing or issue) in order to reduce anxiety. For example, imagine you are at a cocktail party chatting uneasily with a stranger and wish to end the conversation but don't know how to do it gracefully. Your discomfort level rises and then you might say, "My goodness, there's Jane. I haven't seen her in years. Jane, come over here!" Now Jane gets drawn into your two-person interaction in order to reduce your anxiety.

Triangles Tend to Make Underlying Problems Persist, Not Change

A common triangle in marriages (when the couple is low on intimacy and wishes to avoid dealing directly with that issue) is for one spouse to focus more attention on the children or for a spouse to focus extra attention on work (or on stress relievers such as TV, the Internet, or alcohol). Therefore, when a couple at home is feeling uncomfortable with each other or may in fact be arguing, one spouse can say, "I need to give the kids their bath" or "I have some work to do on the computer" as a way to alleviate strain.

The problem with such maneuvers is that it puts the troubled relationship on hold and no issues get solved. *When triangles are in operation, issues don't get resolved—they get reshelved.* When there is high anxiety in a relationship, there are three options. You can confront the issues head-on with all of the anxiety that goes along with doing so; you can end the relationship; or you can divert attention away from the problematic issues by focusing on some other issue, person, or thing. If diversion is repeatedly chosen, nothing is changed and the status quo is maintained.

Two People in the Triangle Are More Connected and the Other Is on the Outside

Who is "in" and who is "out" can shift. For example, imagine John and Mary have a troubled marriage. Mary helps cope with her anxiety by seeking her mother's advice. Her mother knows many of the couple's problems and may or may not take sides. If the advice Mary receives helps her to go to John and all is resolved, fine. But if their marital problems recur and she keeps talking to her mother about

them, then an emotional triangle has formed. When Mary and her Mom are united, John is on the outside. If John complains to Mary that his mother-in-law is too involved and Mary agrees, now Mary and John are more united and the mother is on the outside. If the mother-in-law thinks Mary is unreasonable and calls John to offer emotional support, she and John are united and Mary is on the outside.

Sometimes there is no shifting of roles. One person is always on the outside and the other two are much closer. This situation ensures that no real change will occur unless one person opts out of the triangle.

Forcing the Other Two People in the Triangle to Break Up Strengthens Their Bond

The other two are connected precisely because one is in conflict with you. His anxiety is reduced by connecting to the third person. If you are in conflict with someone who has triangled in a third party, using force to pry them apart is like trying to take a bone away from a hungry dog. They will usually unite to strengthen their bond. This is true whether you are trying to break up a spouse and his lover, an addict and her habit, or a child and his favorite toy.

If You Fail to Break Up the Other Two, You Will Take on More Stress

As the other two unite, their stress decreases. You will become more frustrated and insecure. Less anxious people have no strong desire to change their situation. Their motivation to change decreases. But your motivation to change them *increases* and yet you have the least power. (Who is usually more stressed and least in control, the

wife who repeatedly tries and fails to get her alcoholic husband to stop drinking? Or the husband who finds more clever ways to hide his liquor and still abuse alcohol?)

So you can see that a simple idea of “confronting the other woman” is not so simple after all. It may not only fail, but it may draw them closer together and ease their anxiety while intensifying yours. Not a smart move.

Three's a Crowd—Don't Make It a Circus

It's time to take a closer look at your particular situation and determine what course of action, if any, you should take regarding the other woman. There are four broad areas to consider:

1. What is (was) the nature of the affair and degree of overall threat to your relationship?
2. How did he feel about himself in the affair?
3. What are your truest motivations for confronting her?
4. Given the above, what are the likely consequences?

The Nature of the Affair

There are basically four types of affairs. His affair was brief (one-night stand) or longer but was for sex only; his affair was online only (no physical connection, no meeting for lunch); his affair was emotional with no sex; his affair was emotional and sexual.

All affairs can threaten a relationship. A one-night stand with a stranger after getting drunk at a bar can crush a marriage as easily as

a long-term emotionally involved affair can. However, on average, the less emotional investment a man has in his affair partner, the greater the likelihood he will want the marriage to survive. The longer the affair continues, the harder it will be for him to end it. The more emotionally connected he felt, the more likely he will carry “feelings” for her for some time to come.

Recommendations

- If the affair was a one-night stand with a stranger with no emotional attachment, don't try to seek out the other woman and confront her. She poses no threat. But confronting her could lead to unexpected dangers or complications.
- If the affair was online and the woman does not reside nearby, it's probably okay (but unnecessary) to send her a note stating your anger and your decision to work on the marriage. **Avoid any language that can be interpreted as threatening.** (You may feel powerful when you vent like that, but you may also be arrested.) Better to ignore her.
- If the affair was emotional and/or sexual, the other woman likely has feelings for your husband (and he for her). If she happens to be a friend or a relative of yours, you already have a relationship with her and confronting her makes sense but will probably not be satisfying. You may have a little more leverage since, being a friend or family member, you can make her personal life much more complicated depending upon whom you choose to inform about the betrayal. Still, the fact that your husband betrayed you with someone from your inner circle suggests that relationship and personal problems run far deeper for everyone involved.

Confronting may or may not help but don't make her your priority. She isn't trustworthy. Anything she tells you is suspect. And if she is bold enough to have an affair with your husband while being your friend or relative, she may not care about consequences to the affair being exposed within the family or friendship circles.

How Did He Feel about Himself in the Affair?

Was he her knight in shining armor? Did he feel he was rescuing her (perhaps from an abusive husband or other stressful situation)? If so, your confronting her will tug at his heartstrings—for her. He will want to protect her—from you. You will be shining a light on the very quality that attracted him to her (she was a victim, he was her hero). Don't do it.

Did he feel cared about by her? Listened to? Appreciated? Then he will view her as a good person who does not deserve to be verbally attacked. He will claim (truthfully) that he is responsible for his past choices and that the other woman is not responsible for his actions. He will view your attack on her as malicious, immature, and unnecessary, and as evidence that once again you do not understand or appreciate his side of things. Don't do it.

Was the other woman the "calm in the center of a storm" for him? In other words, was she a sanctuary from the stresses of his life? He will regard your desire to confront her as adding more stress to his life and he will pull away from you. Don't do it.

Was the other woman simply a toy for him to play with? Did he use her? Did she fulfill his narcissistic need for admiration? If so, he may not care if you confront her or not. But you have bigger prob-

lems on your hands. Your man is much more interested in his needs and focusing on what he feels entitled to than on looking honestly at the marriage and at what you require. Ignore her—she probably has enough problems in her life—and look more closely at whether or not you can really stay with a man like him.

What Are Your Truest Motivations for Confronting Her?

Be honest. If it is to attack, intimidate, or punish her, that is extremely understandable but extremely risky. At best you will feel a bit better for venting but you will change nothing. You may even make the situation worse.

Is it to protect your marriage? That's a fine motive. But will it work? If the other woman has no idea you exist and would never be involved with a married man and has been lied to by your husband, she may appreciate knowing those facts. If that is the case, she is as much a victim as you are. Go easy on her. She may become your ally. But if the other woman is heavily invested in maintaining a relationship with your husband, your words will fall on deaf ears. You may give her more information about yourself that she can use to manipulate you. Better avoid this conversation.

Is your motivation to gain a clearer understanding of all that has happened? Do you simply wish to clarify matters and not attack her? That is a more reasonable motivation—if you can handle what she may tell you. But you may not know for sure if what she tells you is the truth. If she wants to keep your husband, she may tell you things to make you more furious with him, whether or not they're true.

Is your motivation “I’ll just feel better if I confront the bitch!”? Be very, very careful. If the other woman still tries to contact your husband, even in small “innocent” ways, you’ll regard it as a slap in your face. You may become outraged at her gall and insist that your husband tell her off in ways he will never feel comfortable doing. Or, if they happen to work with each other, you’ll be fuming if the other woman so much as tells him to “have a nice day” since you’ll see it as her way of being passive-aggressive against you.

Given All of the Above, What Are the Likely Consequences?

If you wish to save your marriage, there is a small chance that confronting the other woman will result in her pulling away from your man. (However, that in no way pulls him toward you—he may be out of the affair but still emotionally out of the marriage, too.) I have spoken to women who have confronted the other woman and who believed it helped, but most didn’t. Most said it aggravated the situation or at best accomplished nothing. Some wives got into serious legal troubles by confronting the other woman.

If the affair is ongoing or has a chance of reigniting (or if your husband has feelings for her even though the affair is clearly over and done with), then any negative attack you make on the other woman (or even *about* her) will result in your husband drawing emotionally closer to her. At a minimum he will feel sorry for her—when he should be feeling sorry for you. If the affair has a chance of reigniting, you can bet that the other woman will contact your husband, inform him of the awful things you said, feel victimized by you, and tug on his heartstrings.

Should You Contact the Other Woman’s Husband or Boyfriend?

If the woman your husband has been having an affair with is married, you may have contemplated informing her husband. You need to ask the question “Will that draw my husband and her closer together?” No way to tell for sure. Affairs are often fed by the drama that unfolds when the affair is exposed. Then it becomes “them” against “you.” If your desire is to complicate her life, you will succeed. But it may hinder your chances of reconciling with your husband, especially if he views what you did as vicious.

The bottom line: if the other woman is already out of the picture, don’t bring her back in by confronting her. If she is still in the picture, your husband has the power to end the affair, not you. Don’t risk drawing them closer.

Can the Triangle Be Dismantled?

Yes. But you must run the risk that you will be the odd woman out. Triangles persist because of the cooperation of all three individuals. If any one of you said, “I’m done with this!” and meant it, the triangle would fall apart. Obviously, if you still want your marriage to succeed, you’re hoping the other woman will leave or your husband will end the affair. Then there is no triangle, just two people (you and him)

trying to rebuild. But what if one of them has mixed feelings? That is the most common scenario I witness as a therapist. She pulls away, then recontacts him. Or he says the affair is over but secretly calls her "just to talk." In those cases, their relationship will be kept in balance (or not) by *your* actions, too. If you try to pull them apart or convince him to end the affair, he will automatically be drawn toward her at least emotionally. (As a silly but common example, imagine you wish to buy a blouse. You find one that is perfect but is more expensive than you'd like. And there is only one like it on the rack. As you struggle to make a decision, another woman sees the blouse, exclaims "I love this!" and takes it from the rack. Now, what are your feelings toward the blouse? You *want* it. When anyone has strong mixed feelings—especially about something important—and someone else tries to prevent them from having one side of it, the other side usually becomes more attractive.)

So what do you do? You have two major steps to take if it is possible for the triangle to fall apart.

1. **You must only try to change the relationship you are in.** That means focus solely on your relationship with your husband. Don't direct your energy unwisely toward the other woman and don't try to force (persuade, cajole, manipulate, coerce, and so on) your husband to abandon his relationship with her. You are not "in" that relationship. He must abandon it because he wants to, not because you forced it.
2. **You must reverse the polarity of anxiety.** In other words, if you are more anxious about his affair and of the possibility of losing the marriage than he is, you have less power and he has less mo-

tivation to make changes. (The person who is unsure if he or she wants the relationship to work always has more power and more leverage in the relationship than the person who is sure.) If the marriage is to survive and thrive, you must not be more invested in things working out than he is. That means you may have to emotionally detach somewhat and be willing to *accept* that the marriage might not work out. In order to do that, you have to find inner resources of strength, feel less emotionally dependent, and be willing to let the chips fall where they may. For things to improve, he has to be worried and anxious about losing *you* at least as much as you're afraid of losing him.

One way to reverse the polarity is by maintaining healthy emotional boundaries. I guarantee that if you are floundering in your effort to manage the painful effects of an affair, your boundaries are out of whack.

Love Knows No Boundaries—or Does It?

For someone to love you, truly love *you*, and be devoted to the relationship in a mature way, there must be a "you" to love. The problem for many is that they lose sight of themselves in a relationship. While men often shield themselves somewhat from closeness to preserve a sense of self, women often enter into a relationship to further fulfill themselves. In other words, they become more dependent upon the relationship succeeding in order to feel worthwhile.

A healthy person has emotional boundaries that allow good things in and keep bad things out. So someone who worries about

being liked or "What do people think of me?" may say yes to things when she should say no. She may tolerate an inadequate or abusive relationship. Think of the cells in your body. They have walls that allow nutrients or hormones in but that try to keep viruses or bacteria out. A weak immune system lets in too many invaders. Or it cannot distinguish between invaders and itself so it attacks itself (which is what happens with arthritis, lupus, or autoimmune diseases). A weak immune system underreacts to danger (an infection that does not heal) or overreacts (an allergy). If your husband had an affair and you are desperate for the marriage to survive, your emotional immune system may go into overdrive. If so, you will overfunction (be suspicious, attacking, obsessed) and try to control things you cannot control (the other woman, his whereabouts) while not controlling well what you might control (your own emotional reaction). The weaker your own emotional immune system, the more you need to be protected from the outside (or put a bubble around your relationship—very impractical) in order to thrive. That is not in your best interests.

To strengthen your emotional immune system and have healthy boundaries, you must define what you will do and not do, what you will tolerate or not tolerate. You must make choices and not be indecisive or wavering. The focus is on *your* response to adversity, not on how others (your husband and "the other woman") should respond.

So, for example, you cannot really control whether your husband is still seeing the other woman in secret. But you can say, "*I am willing to work with you and rebuild our relationship. However, if I am of the opinion you are not fully committed to me, I will reconsider whether I will stay with you.*" That takes the pressure off of you to try to

"catch him" in a lie. It puts the pressure on him. Unless he can convince you that he is not still involved with the other woman, you may leave him.

By defining yourself you need to come up with a "bottom line." This is a statement of integrity, not one of threat or manipulation. Is your bottom line that you will never under any circumstances leave your husband (due to financial concerns, the children, religious beliefs, or lack of confidence in yourself to cope)? Or would you do so under a certain set of conditions? If so, what are those conditions? How long will you allow yourself to be abused, humiliated, lied to, or toyed with? Stating your bottom line does not guarantee that your husband will cooperate. That is not the purpose. This is not about "getting" him to fall in line. It is about clarifying where you stand so that you can make a decision what to do next. It is about you and only you, not him. If he is convinced that you are willing to end a marriage if it becomes unworkable for you, and he wants the marriage to survive more than he wants it to fail, he will now move *toward* you. If, on the other hand, he sees you as being desperate or wishy-washy, he can afford to move slowly and possibly move *away* from you.

Abandon Any Desire for Drama

If you are having a difficult time detaching from the emotional triangle (that is, not getting caught up in the emotional whirlwind it creates) you are too busy creating stories in your mind or replaying the same old stories. You are caught up in (at least) four mind games:

1. "What if?"
2. "I'm a victim."

3. "I'm entitled to rage."
4. "Life is so unfair!"

If you worry about future possibilities that cannot be fully answered at this moment in time, such as your financial situation, the impact of a divorce on your children, or the likelihood of finding a new mate and being happy ("What if?"); or if you chew over details on how you've been betrayed, lied to, or humiliated, ("I'm a victim"); or if you obsess over ways to get even and feel it is your right to keep attacking your partner or the other woman ("I'm entitled to rage"); or if you brood over how you didn't deserve what happened ("Life is so unfair!"), there will be only one outcome for you: a state of helplessness and misery.

Change Mind Games into Mind Frames

Those four mind games are very common. They represent the human condition that arises when fear takes over. But in order to get out of the emotional triangle you are in, they must be replaced by four *mind frames*:

1. "What if" is replaced by "I accept . . ." That is to be followed by any statement that makes sense *in this present moment* such as:

"I accept that I am afraid of my future and I accept that I cannot fully know my future right now and that things may turn out well."

"I accept that I am worried about my children's welfare and I accept that I will do all I can to help them."

"I accept that money may be tight if we divorce and I accept that I will not be destitute and will have resources available to help me."

As you recall from Chapter 4, acceptance allows you to peacefully coexist with conflicting thoughts, without trying to solve what cannot be solved in the moment. It eliminates the inner struggle to come up with answers when none can be had.

2. "I'm a victim" is replaced by "I accept that I am hurt and that I am in charge of my life . . . I can make choices that will help me . . . I can ask for help."
3. "I'm entitled to rage" is replaced by "I'm entitled to speak my mind without harming others . . . I'm entitled to peace of mind and a life of integrity . . . I'm entitled to the love of those who truly care for me."
4. "Life is so unfair" is replaced by "I am so unfair to myself when I demand that others change in order for me to be happy." Or "I accept that life is unfair and I accept that sometimes it is fair."

Checklist for De-Triangling

Answer Yes or No to the following statements to the extent the statements are true for you now.

1. I can stop focusing on the other woman and focus instead on my relationship with my husband.
2. I can stop trying to force him to stay away from her.
3. I can see my deeper motivations for wanting to confront her.
4. I can contemplate the probable consequences if I confront her.

5. I can feel pain (hurt, anger, sadness, fear) without it turning into drama (hysteria, rage, paranoia, depression, and panic).
6. I can define clearly how *I* feel, what *I* want, what *I* will and will not put up with rather than obsess about what *he* must do or not do.
7. I can imagine a decent life without him in it even if I don't want that to happen.
8. If the marriage ends I can manage.
9. I am willing to work within the marriage to try and save it, if he is also willing.
10. I can stop viewing myself as a victim, stop obsessing that I didn't deserve this, stop worrying about matters I can do nothing about at this present moment.

There is no score. The more items you can respond Yes to, the greater likelihood you will not be emotionally devastated by the "love triangle" and the more healthy will be your emotional boundaries.

ten
conversations
you're almost
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