

Couple in the Aftermath of Infidelity: Felony Lies, Conflict Avoidance and Lie Inviting Dynamics

With Ellyn Bader, Ph.D.

Male = Bart (B)

Female = Francesca (F)

Married for 20 years with a 19 year old daughter & a 12 year old daughter

Below you will find excerpts and a summary from this two-hour session. It contains a small bit of dialogue with some participants in my ongoing training group and mostly my interaction with the couple.

This is the very beginning of the first session with a couple who came to therapy in the aftermath of an affair being revealed. I knew nothing about them or their history. Here is how the session began.

Male: *I guess I'll start with the hard facts. We separated. I moved out several months ago. I had an affair. It had been going on for a while when Francesca discovered a gift that I bought for the other woman. She confronted me and I said, "Yes, there was another woman" and that I was moving out. We didn't speak for five or six weeks. When we finally started talking about it, I told her that I would break off the affair.*

However, after a few weeks I thought, "Well, this is kind of silly, because I want a divorce and if I do want a divorce then why does it make any difference what I do?" Then I started to lie more and more. She was suspicious and I just kept adding one lie on top of

the next. I said things like, "You're just making this stuff up and making yourself sick."

Ellyn: This is how he started. This is what he said to me right away at the beginning of the first hour. What are some of the things if you are their therapist? What do you want to pay attention to in this first session? And especially, what are some red flags?

Participant: I guess I'd want to know what it is that brought them in today and what each one of them wants out of coming for this first time.

Participant: From coming into this first session, what is it that led them here and what does each of them want. They might not have told each other what they want.

Participant: They might not even have known until they sat there and they might need to consider it.

Participant: I would like to find out who initiated the session originally.

Participant: I had a gut response, "Gee, I wonder if the husband plans to dump the wife in therapy." I'd want to hold that in the back of my mind as I find out more about what they're there for.

Ellyn: Does anything stand out if you pay attention to the content of what he said?

Participant: They didn't speak for five or six weeks. That's dramatic.

Ellyn: That's very dramatic. What does that potentially say to you?

Participant: Conflict avoidance.

Ellyn: Good. They didn't talk for five or six weeks, which suggests one hypothesis. I'd want to check out if they are a very conflict avoidant couple. What went on that they couldn't speak to each other for five or six weeks after the confrontation took place? I'm going to want to find out in a session if I can how pervasive the conflict avoidance has been in this relationship. Anything else stand out from the content of this paragraph?

Participant: He didn't have any problem coming up with untruths about the relationship and even added one lie on top of the other.

Ellyn: Right. What would that say to you if you heard that and you thought, "OK, this is a guy who can lie easily and put one lie on top of the next."

Participant: It would be hard to regain trust.

Ellyn: It would be hard to regain trust and I want to find out what that means about him and his character structure. What am I dealing with? Am I dealing with somebody who can lie in a lot of situations? Am I dealing with somebody who's very sociopathic? Am I dealing with somebody who's primarily narcissistic? What is it that makes it so easy for him to lie and especially to lie glibly after twenty years of them being together? And it's not clear what he wants. I don't know yet what is motivating him.

His ending the marriage is very abrupt. One other thing that stood out to me is that he is okay adding one lie on top of the next, but also he says things to her like, "You're just making this stuff up and making yourself sick." Not only is he willing to lie to her, but he goes further. He is willing to attack her and blame her when she tries to figure out what is really going on. Here he moves into the territory of **Felony Liar**.

So, what I said was, “*So you denied her view of reality and challenged her perception.*” (I thought, “Okay, I’m going to see what happens if I push on the most extreme thing that he did. What is this going to tell me about him?”)

Male: *That went on for two months. During this time Francesca and I would talk on the telephone a couple times a week and we would have these long discussions that were awful for me. I’d apologize and say yes she’s right and other times I would just listen to it, but we never got anywhere. We’d just go over the same ground repeatedly.*

Two weeks ago, we were on the telephone, she was horribly suspicious again and I was getting a little tired of lying. So I decided that I would tell her the truth, so I did. At that point, I told her that I would break off the relationship with the other woman and so I did that very night.

Ellyn: (I am now noticing some red flags. One is his quick action to dump the affair because he’s uncomfortable with the conversation with his wife. This is starting to look like a guy who will do what’s expedient. His conflict avoidance is one big factor. There’s massive and pervasive avoidance of truth and differentiation. He seems to be somebody who will just make a quick decision that’s expedient for him, especially when the heat is on.)

He says, “Right. I was getting a little tired of lying.” He didn’t say I was sorry I had been lying. The lying did not seem to be very hard on him.

A possible question to ask him at this point would be, “What do you mean you got a little tired of lying?” Again I’m looking at whether you can reveal the character issues that are here so that you can make good decisions about how to proceed.

You might even say to him, "What made these long discussions so awful for you?" Let him answer that and then say, "How do you think they were for your wife?" This would begin to uncover his capacity for empathy.

Male: *Where I am now is I'm out of the marriage. I want a divorce and I'd like to proceed as quickly as possible to get a divorce as amicably as we can. She says she's not ready for the divorce and wants to get therapy with me before we go ahead with a divorce. I'd like to move ahead fast.*

Ellyn: *So you're in a hurry and you'd like to move on with things as quickly as possible to get an amicable divorce? (He nodded yes, very emphatically.) Francesca, where are you?*

Female: *I'm so sad he just dumped me one day. After all these years of marriage he just dumped me. I'm also angry, he's nice to her and she's nothing but a prostitute.*

Ellyn: *A prostitute?*

Female: *He met her in a bar and she was just thinking about becoming a prostitute.*

Ellyn: *Bart, will you tell me a little more about this woman?*

Male: *Yes, she comes from Argentina. She was here on a student visa, I met her in a bar and we kind of got involved.*

Ellyn: *What does kind of involved mean?*

Male: *I just started seeing her often and told her she should move here to live.*

Ellyn: *I'd like to see if I can get some more clear information. Did this woman move here because of you?*

Male: *Yes, she did.*

Ellyn: *What was her understanding?*

Male: *She would move and I'd help her go to school.*

Female: *Did you pay for her to come?*

Male: *Yes. The reason was that I wanted companionship. I wanted out of the marriage because there was no affection in our marriage.*

Female: *He's had all this sex and companionship while I've been very lonely and struggling. You owe it to me to do some therapy. You've never given me a chance.*

Ellyn: (Here you are. You're the therapist. You're in the midst of this tension and upset. What do you do? What stands out? What do you need to do in this session? What is your role?)

Participant: You need to determine if, in fact, they are there to do therapy?

Ellyn: Right.

Ellyn: Exactly. You know you have one person who very much wants the therapy and another partner who doesn't want or may not want the therapy at all.

What I wanted to do was get more history first. Since it became increasingly clear that he did some "felony lying," I also want to know about any Lie Inviting behavior from her.

I discovered they had a very extreme pattern of conflict avoidance including a pattern that was a recreation of his childhood pattern with his mother.

When he was growing up, he had a mother who would get quite angry with him, then he would lie, then he would cry and his mother would cry. They would have a big make up session and then she would say how much she loved him.

His unconscious fantasy wish was that his wife would give him affection and give him love in the same way that his mother gave him love. That justified him telling any kind of lie at all, because at the core was his desire to get the love and affection that he wanted.

The way that I ended the session was to try to get clear about whether or not each of them wanted to do therapy. I wanted to clarify my role. Was I going to be a couples therapist? Was I going to be mainly an individual therapist for her? Was I being asked to help them separate?

He kept saying he wanted an amicable divorce. What I said to him was if he was going to be able to get an amicable divorce, he was going to have to be able to be more honest and up front than he'd ever been before about anything with her. It's not reasonable or realistic that you can lie, deceive and betray your partner of 20 years without any residue.

I also asked her to look at how difficult it is for her to hear the truth. I left them at the end of this session with decisions to make. I didn't schedule a second session immediately.

I said, “I want the two of you both to go out of here, to do some soul searching, think about whether you’re here for therapy and to work on repairing some of what’s gone on now and over the 20 years. Are you here to make a decision? Are you here to divorce? Call me as soon as you’ve discussed those questions. And you do not each have to have the same agenda.”

They called me back about four days later and he said that he was there to make a decision and probably to divorce, but to clarify the decision. And she said that she wanted therapy.

I saw them again and it became clear that he was definite about getting a divorce. He was willing to face up to all these issues, do some therapy, not just pull out and be abrupt. He was willing to stop being avoidant and stop refusing to speak to her.

I ended up seeing them over a period of months to help them through the process, to help with more accountability on both sides, but his in terms of the destructiveness of the lying, the lack of differentiation, and what that had resulted in. I helped her learn how to hear some things that were tough to hear without just yelling and screaming at him.

Participant: It also sounds like a case where you were able to engage them productively for a number of months when some therapists might not have been able to do that.

Ellyn: Thank you, I think that’s true. I think I was able to walk a very fine line with him between being quite confrontational, but also supportive enough that he could hang in there and do what was excruciating for him to do. Somehow, he and I developed a good enough relationship that he could take it from me.

Participant: Ellyn, your goal to continue in a couple's context – was that in hopes that the relationship would move forward as a marital relationship or was it truly looking at divorce counseling, helping the two process the decision to divorce?

Ellyn: In the first session, I didn't know. Soon, it was the latter. It was helping them process the decision to divorce. With two kids involved and with the amount of anger and hostility and the amount of damage he had done by calling her crazy and telling her so many lies, I wanted to prevent more damage. Since he had spent a number of months telling her how crazy she was, there was a lot to clarify.

There was so much damage that had been done that I felt like seeing them together would be worthwhile, but not to put this marriage back together. The extent of the lying was not going to be repaired and he didn't want to repair it.

My role I think was helping him take a high level of personal accountability for what he had done. With him taking that level of personal accountability for what he had done, she was able then to work through some of the anger, hurt and betrayal that she felt, because so much of it had just all been blamed on her.

She had done some things to contribute to it. There are always two sides to a story, but the extent to which he'd been willing to carry it was much more based in his character than it was in who she was as a person.

Participant: I find it quite admirable that they were willing to go through this process.

Ellyn: Yes. I think there are many couples that will be willing when you are able to hold both of their realities and help them look at what they are struggling with. Somebody doesn't stay in a 20-year marriage without having some feelings for their spouse even though they're not overt. He also had some feelings for his children even though he was pretty far on that narcissistic continuum.

In case you want to dig deeper into this case and into the process of confronting lies, I offer you a two more brief sections from the session.

Part of the session on Conflict Avoidance

Ellyn: You felt what about this pattern?

Male: I don't know. It was the same pattern I had with my mother. When I had fights with my mother it would always end up with she's right, I'm wrong, I would apologize and then she would stroke me. Only in my marriage I never got the strokes. I always thought that if I gave her the apology she wanted than I would at least get touched. But instead she would be cold for days at a time.

Ellyn: What stopped you from telling her how much you wanted her love?

Male: I started rationalizing all kinds of things to myself.

Ellyn: Is there something you would have liked to do other than rationalize?

Male: *Well that's when I became corrupt. I should have really had it out with her right then, but I didn't. I should have said "If you don't love me, then let's get a divorce and if you do love me then treat me better."*

Ellyn: *Do you remember what the rationalizations were?*

Male: *Basically I thought we were incompatible and if I brought it out in the open we would have to split up. The thought of leaving the kids was too unbearable to me so I just decided not to get into it.*

Ellyn: *Why do you believe you couldn't tell her that you believed, really believed she didn't love you?*

Male: *I'm really good at putting up a façade. I can see how talented I was at keeping the façade going. All I did through the years was put up little hints about something being wrong, about wanting affection or thinking she didn't love me. I just gave little hints. I didn't want to risk her anger – she's very, very powerful when she's angry and she does everything right, so she's right and I'm wrong and she always wins.*

Ellyn: *What's so scary to you about staying there when you don't agree or you feel angry?*

Male: *I don't know. She's just righteously right and I have a personality problem where I just run away from any anger.*

Ellyn: *You certainly didn't hesitate from doing things that would increase your own anger. Do you know what I mean?*

Male: *Well I certainly wouldn't tell her when I was frustrated and then I would feel more and more frustrated.*

Ellyn: And as you got more frustrated you got more and more angry.

Male: I guess so – if you put it that way.

Ellyn: Well, you keep acting in ways that will make you angrier. The trade-off you make is that you're willing to have yourself seethe even more and more.

Part of the session on challenging their pattern of Lie Inviting and Felony Lying

Female: He's been telling me lies. I didn't trust him. He said I should and now it's turning out that it's all lies.

Ellyn: What were the clues that you knew, really knew that he was still lying?

Female: He maintained that he wasn't emotionally involved with this woman but in my heart I knew he was and today, now, I just found out he was. I kept telling him that he was and you kept saying no.

Ellyn: There were some clues, how did you know?

Female: Because he was hostile. In fact, I still think it is going on – maybe not the physical part but the emotional part and I don't want to talk about the divorce while he's still emotionally involved with her.

Male: I don't see any logical connection between those two things at all.

Ellyn: There are a couple of paradoxes in this situation (to Bart) You said at the beginning that you wanted an amicable divorce, as amicable as possible. (Bart laughs) What's your laugh?

Male: *Well, I've done everything possible to make it miserable.*

Ellyn: *That's true. So you can see the hypocrisy in that. When you refuse therapy that's fine, that may be honest and it may be putting out exactly what you want which is to stay involved with this other woman and get a divorce. However, in this case it's not going to get you an amicable divorce. Ironically what the two of you have right now is the possibility of dealing with each other differently than you have in all these years of marriage. It will require some tough things from both of you if you want to do that.*

Ellyn: *(to Female) It will probably require you hearing the truth about some things that are very painful and not demand that he apologize.*

Ellyn: *(to Male) And for you it's going to mean speaking up right now, telling the truth to her in a way that you haven't in all these years. It will mean being honest if there is an emotional attachment and saying so. It would mean being honest if you call your mistress or see her and F asks you, answering honestly. It will mean you letting her know what financial obligations you have to the other woman.*

Male: *I'm in a quandary over this. I want out of this marriage so I don't keep having to justify myself to Francesca. She's putting me in the position of having to justify myself before she'll let me go.*

Ellyn: *Actually she's not asking you for justification, she's asking you for a kind of honesty that you haven't given her in the past. You've evaded and even challenged her sanity at times.*

Male: But If I tell her the truth she's going to get upset and either make me justify or say how could you possibly be doing such a stupid thing.

Ellyn: Calling it justifying it to her is interesting. I think if what you're doing is something you can justify to yourself then you won't have a problem standing behind it. Perhaps she's asking you to be accountable in areas where you feel uneasy.

We then have a discussion about whether his honesty will be used by her for revenge and punishment.

Thanks for sticking with this learning transcript. There was a lot more but posting it all seemed like it might be overwhelming. I will really value reading your comments about this session.