

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.

