



“You’re Having an Affair” “No I am Not!” An Unusual Way to Handle It

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Peter Pearson, Ph.D.

It’s all too common for couples therapists to hit an impasse where we scratch our heads and wonder, “How do we keep things going forward?”

Dr. Peter Pearson is co-founder of The Couples Institute with his wife, Dr. Ellyn Bader. He will tell you this rings true for him as well. In his more than 30 years of practice, Pete developed a remarkable ability to direct couples and delineate the work to do to reach their desired direction. Today he shares his approach with you — for when your next steps in therapy aren’t immediately obvious.



Dr. Peter Pearson and Dr. Ellyn Bader

Here’s how Pete describes resetting the direction

Almost all of the time when I get bogged down with a couple, it’s because we’ve lost our direction about why we’re meeting, who’s responsible for what, and what my role will be. The content of the issues varies from one couple to another, but what causes trouble is that we’ve lost the North Star.

Many partners make tepid, lukewarm agreements and then find endless ways to go around them. So, you need to keep bringing them back to what a good marriage looks like if they are going to stay together. Their motivation to change comes from their vision of what type of relationship they want to create, why that is important to each, and what is required of them — not their partner! — to create this kind of relationship.

Sometimes that involves being very direct and deeply empathic.

Defining What “Forward” Looks Like

The following case was presented to me by Joe, a therapist who was quite stuck with a couple who was struggling with a distressingly common problem.

The couple was married for 31 years. For several years, the wife had been accusing her husband of having an affair that started years ago and that she believes is still ongoing. He denies this and the therapist does not know what to believe. The question for the therapist was: “How do we go forward?”

This has been a long painful argument. They want to stay together, and when this topic is not rearing its head they get along OK.

The primary obstacle is that it's really hard, almost impossible, to go forward because there is no agreement between them on what progress would look like. You can't lead them unless there is an agreement on what the next steps would be. Without that, you will get triangulated and the couple will continue to attack, defend, accuse, and stay polarized. In this dynamic you are likely to spin in circles. In my experience, it takes direction and heightened empathy to help couples move beyond this kind of impasse.

Demonstrating Heightened Empathy — More than Active Listening

Stressed couples have a painful dilemma. They are emotionally armoured to protect themselves from pain and emotional risk. Yet they long for a better connection.

Armouring and connecting are incompatible!

Demonstrating heightened empathy means going deeply into where each partner is fearful, delving into what their problem and dilemma is. In order to start leading them out, it will require much more than active listening. It will mean going deeply into their hearts and minds.

Joe role played each part of the couple to get a better feel for their dilemma. He started by playing the role of the wife.

Wife: Okay. Yeah, I just don't trust him. I've known from the beginning about the affair. I can tell by the way that this woman in particular looks at him and how she avoids any contact with me, and I've been suspecting for a long time. I feel like I'm going crazy — like I don't know my own judgment anymore.

Pete: Right now I have a hell of a lot of empathy for you. It's hell when you live with suspicion. It is absolute hell when you can't trust your own reality. It's absolute hell when you want to depend on somebody you live with and you feel like you can't. You can't plan for the future. You question the past. You question your reality today. You want a definition of hell? You're living it.

Wife: You are right. It's hell and I can't go on like this.

Pete: If I were you, I would be so torn after investing nearly 31 years in this marriage when you have absolutely no idea what to look forward to. That's scary, it's intimidating, it's crazy-making and, frankly, here you are still being a rational person. That's impressive.

Wife: Thanks. Sometimes I don't know how I do it.

Pete: Actually, thank you. Sometimes I don't know how you do it either, living with that kind of reality-bending, psychological and emotional experience. Because you know what? After 31 years of investing in this marriage, you don't know whether to stay and live in pain, suspicion, and uncertainty, or to leave and flush 31 years away — to blow apart all the good things that you guys have created together. And in fact, there are some good things that you have created together.

What a horrible dilemma. Do you armour yourself against further hurt, pain, and disappointment? Or do you open yourself up to another experience to see if you can rebuild the future? If that's not one hell of a dilemma, I don't know what is.

My focus is on her pain and dilemma rather than on the validity of her perception, because I have no idea how valid it is.

Establishing a Sense of Balance

Let's shift now and see how I talked to the husband, with Joe playing the role of the husband.

I'm thinking about what you're up against and it's not easy at all because you can't prove a negative. If somebody accuses you of doing something, there's no way to prove that you didn't do it or that you are not that kind person. I think about the challenge of trying to stay open to your partner when they will not believe you. When you're not believed, how in the hell can you stay open and responsible and vulnerable and reaching out? You know full well that one sentence from now you're going to get smacked again? Who can keep standing up to those kinds of blows?

It's hell trying to prove something that cannot be proven, which is to prove a negative. And yet there is a part of you that says, "You know what, I still want to reach out even though I will be discouraged, disappointed, shot down. I'm still here."

Seeding Hope and Aspiration

It takes heightened empathy to help each partner begin to recognize that the other person has a struggle, too. And as each client begins to see that we can relate to their extremely painful dilemma, the door opens slightly for them to drop their defences and begin to move beyond their impasse.

So, even as we empathize with our clients' experiences, we also want to start planting seeds of hope and aspiration. We want to keep directing them toward the questions:

- Where are we going?
- Why do you want to go there?
- What's going to make it difficult for each of you to support that direction?

Here's how I might begin planting those seeds:

To the wife: I feel tremendous empathy for your challenge, your situation, and your dilemma. On the one hand, if I'm in your shoes I'd want to protect myself again from getting my hopes up and then being painfully disappointed. You've had a belly full of disappointments in your life, starting early. If I'm in your shoes, I'd want to protect myself against future pain and disappointment. It's a horrible dilemma.

And yet there's another part of you that says, "We have good stuff. I would like to build on that. I would like to find ways of connecting. I would like to find ways of doing this together."

Maybe that part would even think about doing it as a team so both of you are working together to create a better future. But that's not going to be easy for the part of you that's armoured.

Maybe a hopeful part of you thinks, "Here's an opportunity for me to work as a team with my husband so we can be supportive, trusting, and connecting even though that's not going to be easy. But it might be worth taking an experimental step, a small risk to find out what could be possible. I would not be committed to anything, I could always go back to my protective self. But maybe I could try a small step to break this log jam. Thirty-one years of marriage could be worth trying an experiment.

Calling it an experiment is emotionally less risky than asking for a change of beliefs or perceptions.

To the husband: You, too, have 31 years of a good investment. However, it is not easy to be empathic to her pain of deep confusion and her reality bending denials. Even so, perhaps there is a part of you that still has a strong investment in recreating a strong foundation, a foundation where you can go forward standing shoulder to shoulder facing the future together. Loving and trusting and being there for each other. Perhaps even realizing the promise of what brought you together in the first place.

Getting through this as a team while both of you resist the pulls of our sex obsessed culture, sex filled ads and internet apps promoting infidelity.

I'd go on to explain **to both of them it** gets even worse.

There is a region of our brain — the emotional brain — that is devoted to self-protection. And that part of the brain is exceptionally persistent when it feels fear.

When it is afraid it has three reflexive reactions.

1. **Get aggressive** — blame, shame, guilt, attack
2. **Freeze** — stop thinking, go passive, or become resentfully compliant
3. **Retreat** — withdraw, give the cold shoulder

These are all "flinches" that happen automatically for self-protection.

These flinches are what mess up marriages. One flinch triggers a flinch in your partner, which retriggers you.

You guys are in this pattern.

Fortunately, this pattern is not totally pervasive in your marriage like in many other marriages where this dynamic shows up.

Most couples cannot keep a boundary around their accuse/deny flinch, and the entire marriage gets flushed down the toilet. So good for you.

You are doing something great. Keeping the boundary around the flinch and still seeking a way out of the mess you are in. You are looking for ways to escape the trap you have been in and hoping for a way to create a stronger team.

Would I be reasonably correct making that kind of assumption?

When I described potential aspirations, I always checked them out by asking if I was somewhat correct. Almost always I got an affirmative.

As you each probably know, neither of you can create a strong team alone.

This will be a mutual endeavor.

Here is a suggested first step, should you decide to take the risk and make the effort.

It won't be easy, effortless, or enjoyable.

But it will be effective to begin your journey to a stronger union and a future of hope.

It's an experiment that we can practice now.

Are you willing to consider trying it even though it will be difficult?

It would be extremely difficult to refuse at this point which, is why I put so much effort into setting the stage with heightened empathy. When I described the potential difficulty of doing the exercise, couples immediately felt that I understood them quite deeply. And when I referred to the exercise as an experiment, couples became more willing to try it because, as an experiment, it's something that they can choose whether to continue or not.

Nobody is asking them to change! We're just inviting them to try an experiment, which is much less risky.

Describing the Experiment:

Think of this as an experiment. Neither of you will be committed to continue the experiment after today. You can always go back to your old patterns.

Repeatedly I found that telling partners they can go back to their old patterns is quite reassuring and supports taking a risk.

To the husband: When your wife accuses you of being in an affair, you respond by saying, "Even though I cannot prove to you that I am not having an affair, tell me more about your dilemma, your fears, your pain."

And then you listen, recap, and stay curious. If necessary, ask for elaboration.

To the wife: Instead of continuing to attack his denial, talk about your dilemma, your fears of getting your hopes up, your fear of trusting again.

We can practice this right now so I can coach you through the process.

Now this will not solve the problem. But it will begin to shift how you talk about it, which is the beginning to take small steps into safer conversations and more trustworthy dialogues.

Having the courage to express your thoughts and emotions and having the steadfast quality of hearing difficult emotions will begin to create trust.

To both partners: Listening without flinching is what builds trust.

Expressing deeper emotions builds trust and emotional strength.

And trust is the necessary foundation of any relationship that flourishes.

This experiment can be one step in changing a painful communication process so you can each find ways of reaching each other again. It won't solve the believability problem but it is a more effective way to communicate about pain and disappointment.

And in every relationship, partners need to find a way to discuss their unique disappointments. Every couple has their own struggle to find or create better ways to work through disappointments as a team.

So, I realize this experiment has limited goals. But for the next few minutes are you willing to give it a go?

Getting permission enhances the probability of a good outcome.

Some Principles That Guide This Approach.

- Describe aspirations — what the partners might achieve and a way to get there with teamwork.
- Work at deeply understanding their different dilemmas.
- Let them know you appreciate the risk and effort involved in getting through their challenges.
- Set up an experiment you can do in the office so you can guide it.
- Tell them the limits of the experiment to reduce the probability of getting “Yes buts.”
- Don't ask them about their goals as they will mostly be goals for their partner.
- It's crucial to emphasize the iron motivation both partners will need in order to move forward. And this is where you'll need to pledge your support and guidance if they choose to go forward on this path.

Developing Your Voice as a Couples Therapist

Now remember, it took me many years of practice to hone the ability to take this kind of direct, high energy, extreme, deep-empathy approach with couples.

And your task is to find your own voice. You will find your own way to be. You're not going to find guidelines in a book about how to do this. It simply takes practice.

But give yourself the option to show your clients where you stand, what you would like to do, and what you see. Give yourself that choice. You will find your voice sooner and help more couples along the way.

The Developmental Model Training Program

To go deeper with the Developmental Model created by Peter and Ellyn, join The Developmental Model Training Program.

While we only open the program a couple of times per year, you can learn more about it [here](#).

