

Managing the Crisis of Infidelity: How to Lead Your Clients from Raw Pain to Constructive Action

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Pete: Welcome, everybody, to what I know will be an extremely informative and interesting webinar *on dealing with the complexities of infidelity*. *This is one of the most complex* issues therapists ever face. By comparison, figuring out a hotel clock radio is child's play.

Now, infidelity is not just a relationship problem. It includes a complex interplay with emotional/psychological pain, plus other intangible components, like culture, spiritual components, violated values, questioning we are together or why we should work to stay together.

Infidelity is not simply a problem to be solved. It goes to the core experiences of safety, guilt, anger, accountability, and then trying to work through this anguish when the communication skills of the couple are often rudimentary at best.

If that's not enough, infidelity can trigger intense countertransference in the therapist. We're not only required to manage our own emotions, but to stay emotionally flexible and intellectually nimble. So we try to understand and connect with one partner, and then quickly we have to shift to a totally opposite perspective of the other partner. And then, we seek to build a bridge that reaches beyond and through their self-protections. This kind of task requires a steady hand at the helm. I think one of the best guides possible for your continued journey into the land of infidelity is Ellyn Bader.

She is among what I think is a very small group of therapists, who actually enjoy working with infidelity. If you're going to be good with this situation, this population, you need to enjoy it, and I know that Ellyn enjoys it because we co-founded The Couples Institute, and Ellyn is not a masochist.

Because she's attracted to the challenges of infidelity, she comprehensively studies the dynamics of the couple, the therapist, and the interplay of all three. It's not only her experience that Ellyn draws on for today, she draws on the experience of therapists in 34 different countries who are in her online training program. They described their challenges with infidelity, so Ellyn gets the perspective of hundreds of therapists in vastly different cultures and perspectives, and you are in for a treat today.

Welcome, Ellyn!

Ellyn: Thank you, Pete. I appreciate your introduction. Thank you very much. I am delighted to be here with all of you today. And as Pete said, I don't know if the right word is "enjoy," but I see a lot of couples with infidelity, and I particularly working with this group. Not because of the pain and many times you have to sit with really raw pain, but because the crisis can be such a catalyst for enormous growth.

What I'm going to be doing today is talking about really managing the crisis in those early sessions and creating the foundation that leads your clients away from that pain and into being able to take construction action and to making a solid commitment to the work with you.

Here at The Couples Institute, our mission is preventing premature and unnecessary divorces. So many divorces just ricochet through generations in the family and creates so, so much pain and difficult, and future difficulty.

: Our hope is to create loving, thriving, growing relationships. And also training a core of committed couples therapists worldwide.

I will say that I appreciate those of you who are taking time on a Friday afternoon, when maybe you could be out enjoying the sunshine or doing something else. Showing your commitment by being here, ready to do this webinar with me.

A couple of years ago now, I sent out a survey to therapists about their challenges working with infidelity. I had well over 1,000 therapists who responded.

The things that were most often described as their challenges were not being pulled into over-identifying with the hurt partner. It's so easy to align yourself with the betrayed spouse, and then get triangulated from doing that.

They're also often stuck with the rage that the betrayed partner has and their inability to get beyond that rage.

They talked about how you challenge a lying client without shaming them. It's not always easy to do that.

And because there's so many difficult feelings that come up in working with infidelity, just like one partner is almost in a hurry to smooth things over, a therapist can get into that same kind of hurry, hoping that they're going to make some positive changes.

It's often hard not to take the side of the victim spouse.

We're going to be looking at how you take a couple, who comes in, in that very hurt, very betrayed place, and move forward.

Affairs, I don't think, are very often about sex. I'm obviously talking from a Western cultural perspective. But in our culture, marriage often carries an assumption of sexual exclusivity, unless the couple has agreed to some form of consensual non-monogamy.

What is inevitable when you have an affair is that you have a situation where the spouse who didn't know about the affair has been deceived. There has been maybe a low level or a high level of dishonesty and deception, but they definitely have been deceived. And the partner having an affair may also have deceived themselves quite a bit.

What you have is you enter into the couple's system at a time where a good faith agreement that people made, usually on the day they got married has been violated under the pretense of being loyal.

I like to sometimes go to Webster's dictionary and make sure to define terms when I'm teaching.

I've put up here the definitions of affairs and infidelity. I think the one here that really matters is that infidelity takes place when there is a betrayal of the trust or loyalty when there is a reason to expect loyalty and trust.

What two people have created around themselves and around their marriage is a boundary, a kind of exclusivity and loyalty. And then, when infidelity takes place, that is completely shattered.

We are going to be following a couple today and I'm going back and forth between the PowerPoint and a video.

The couple that we're going to be following is a couple that Pete and I saw. The pieces I'm going to be showing you are from their first session. It was a session that was about an hour and 45 minutes long.

The only thing that we knew about this couple before we sat down with them was that they had been together for four years, and that there had been discovered infidelity. Actually, it was the third time that he had cheated on her. They had seen one of our associates at The Couples Institute for one session, and it was a highly emotional session. And then the therapist suggested that they come in and see us for this session when we were developing some videos that we could use for training. I'm very indebted to this couple and very appreciative that they have allowed us to share their work with all of you.

I'm going to turn it on, and we're going to see a little bit about the beginning of what we first heard.

Pete: Why are we here today?

Dominic: I don't know. Obviously, we're here for a reason. We definitely are going through a rough patch. I've had a few indiscretions or infidelities and cheated on her a few times.

Going to therapy, you hear the other person's feelings. You hear the other person's feelings. You hear what they're saying, but it's completely different to remind yourself of those, every day.

Pete: What would be useful for you, Arielle?

Arielle: I think that I would like to walk away with maybe an understanding of why he cheated. Is it because he's not in love with me? I'm just kind of unsure of the why.

Pete: What are the emotions as you talk about this?

Arielle: I'm sad, obviously. I feel kind of numb, but kind of... I don't know. Everything switched in a moment.

Ellyn: You were moving forward, making plans to get married, hoping to be married?

Arielle: Yeah. We said we'd be engaged for our four-year anniversary.

I don't want him to live with like what are you doing? Who are you with? I don't want to be a warden. I wouldn't want to live like that. I can't understand why he does what he does if he doesn't what he does, so I don't know how to get past it and think that it won't continue. I don't want to be in an open relationship.

Ellyn: Okay. You've just seen only two minutes of this session and there are some significant things that we already know from just the first two or so minutes.

First, we listened to him... Let me say I know that some of you may have had a little trouble with the audio and it gets much better on this tape. And also, there's a few places where there are some subtitles when it's not so good, so hang in there. Don't get discouraged, and I guarantee it does get better.

What we know about him is that he's kind of minimized the infidelities. I just had a few infidelities.

He's indicated that it's hard for him to remember what matters to her, which in our framework shows that he's low on other differentiation. He doesn't have a lot of capacity to get out of himself and really know what it is she's experiencing. It's really hard for him to remember what matters to her.

There are also a few significant issues in what we've learned about her. Mostly and probably most crucially is that she holds some theories that create a lot of unnecessary pain and grief. She wonders if he's not in love

with her, that they're not supposed to be together. She was expecting them to get married and seeing that they were moving towards marriage, and now she's perceiving that they are going to separate and not get married.

Let's talk a minute about stage one of working with infidelity. Because most often, when you work with a couple who comes in during that crisis period, there's so much intense emotion, and your challenges are to be able to slow the process down enough and manage that intensity that's in front of you enough that you can actually outline what the individual dilemma is for each partner. As we move forward in this tape, you'll get to see how Pete and I did that with this couple.

You're also going to want to very early on be able to confront the need to make impulsive, premature decisions. They want to make decisions to put an end to the pain, and often those decisions are very emotionally based decisions without having a chance for any healing or ability to step back and really make good decisions.

There's often a need to clarify threats, like what's going to happen now? Is the affair over? Is the couple going to continue to live together, or are they going to live separately? And what are they going to do about therapy? And what is their actual commitment to the therapy?

It's easier to figure out the commitment to future work after the individual issues of each partner are defined because then you're laying out the landscape of what it is they're going to be working on.

You want to be sure that you don't get caught in their blame cycle. Like I said earlier, it's going to mean you'll take a very strong leadership role to control the communication, not allow it to escalate, and explain what is needed for therapy to take place. What's needed for there to be progress? What the therapy is going to look like? And the need for honesty to change the trajectory that has been there for whatever period of time the infidelity has lasted.

We're going to see a little bit more here about Arielle and her perception of their problem.

Arielle: I have been very committed, my whole life almost too much centered around our relationship. Just every decision I made, everything I did, was

for us and for our future, for our relationship. Our friends are so enmeshed, our families are so enmeshed. We own a business together, we live together. We have a home together.

Ellyn: Everything was joint.

Arielle: Very, very joint, almost like a... I mean four plus years and it feels like... I know it's not a marriage, but it feels very sad.

Pete: The downside of too much togetherness is what? There's too much in joint. What's the downside in organizing too much of your life around the couple, etc. etc.? What's the downside of that?

Arielle: I was placing my self-worth on what he thought of me. I felt so un-sexy. I just wondered if I wasn't enough. I think that's on me, right?

Ellyn: Kind of like you've let yourself be robbed.

Arielle: Yeah. I was a very confident person. To just feel... I don't know...when you're so in love with someone and they are unfaithful to you, it rocks that confidence.

Ellyn: How did you find out about the infidelity?

Arielle: After he cheats, he gives me... I can always tell. Like he will cheat on me and then he'll get very, very angry the next day because he's trying to create something that doesn't exist that I'm like, whoa!

Dominic: No, I don't think I'm trying to create something that doesn't exist. I think I realize what I've done. Reflective anger, I think. Weird as this sounds, I think it's difficult to be the cheater. You have to look in the mirror.

Ellyn: It's fair to say you're mad at yourself. Feeling a lot of shame too.

Arielle: He feels so much shame and so much guilt that it overshadows my pain, and I just collapse. I'm feeling so much for you, can you just for once...

Ellyn: Create some space?

Arielle: Feel for me, yeah.

Dominic: Yeah, it's tough.

Ellyn: You're both feeling a lot of pain in different ways, and it's hard to make space and create space to figure out how to deal with each of your pain separately.

Dominic: Obviously, I've had a lot of time to think about this, but it's just like the shock waves just keep coming. Every day, I realize something new that I've done to negatively impact her. It's just hard to deal with.

Ellyn: I want to underline a couple of the interventions. Clearly, we have a relationship that for a long period of time, felt safe and secure to her. She believed that they were...They had gotten to know each other. They had dated. They'd started living together, and they were planning to get engaged at four years.

She believed she had a safe, secure relationship. However, she was also aware that this is a relationship in which she's given herself up a lot and given up her sense of self-esteem and self-worth. She showed some insight when Pete asked her what is the downside of too much togetherness; she was able to articulate the fact that she had given herself up.

They both acknowledged that his feelings dominate the relationship much more than hers, and that doesn't seem to create too much stress for him. His recognition that his feelings do dominate.

You also just saw when I started talking to them that it's very difficult to know what's his pain and what's her pain and be able to locate each of those separately. That is part of what I mentioned earlier in terms of you want to be able to see if you're able to outline the individual issues for each partner that contributed to the circumstances that they're in.

In the back of my mind, when I'm meeting with an infidelity couple for the first time, or two, or three, I'm looking at assessing the infidelity on a lot of different dimensions. And then, that becomes the backdrop that forms what you're doing and why you're doing it.

Some of those dimensions are understanding the historical evolution of the relationship. In this case, it was that four-year period that I outlined to you a minute ago.

You're looking to see if you know the developmental stage of the relationship. If you've worked with us, you know what those stages are.

At a minimum, what we can say from the little bit we know of this couple is that this is a pre-commitment couple. They have made several steps of commitment, but they have not yet gotten married or formed a clear boundary around themselves as a couple.

We don't know yet what their attachment styles are, although it certainly looks like hers might be an anxious, insecure attachment, and his more avoidance; but we haven't been with them long enough to be certain.

We're looking. You're seeing me start to look for what are their individual dynamics.

Other things that help in your assessment are understanding the timing of the affair. There are pretty common times for affairs to take place. This is one of them because this affair took place just really a few weeks before they were going to get engaged on their anniversary.

As the anxiety of making the commitment grew...his affair took place.

You didn't see it here on the video. His affairs have been pretty much one-night stands. There are three of them, but they've all been very, very brief.

The number of affairs is three.

He isn't somebody who's been able to lie to her continually over a period of time. Like she described it, he gets angry and she picks it up, and she asks him, and he comes clean. While he deceived her in terms of where he was or who he was with, it's not the same kind of ongoing deception that you get in long-stamdomg affairs. I had a case, somebody writing to me today about a case, where there was an 18-year history of deception.

But when infidelity is discovered, it calls into question just the very nature of the primary relationship and the primary attachment. Because what she thought was secure or safe, isn't. It's no longer secure.

The person who has the affair is making a unilateral choice to end what was an equilateral decision. Equilaterally together, they decided on monogamy. And now, on three different occasions, he's violated that commitment.

It definitely calls into question the future. It calls into question, who is this person? It calls into question, what really is the nature of our relationship? And what in the world is going to happen? The intensity of emotion is based in so much uncertainty, and so much anxiety about what now?

The reason I talk a lot about being able to circumscribe each partner's issues as each partner is confronted at a time like this with both an interpersonal and an intrapsychic challenge. The challenge is around not only what does the affair mean, and should I leave, or should I stay? Am I staying because I feel trapped? But really, what is it that the betrayal means about character, and about human vulnerability?

All of us have seen articles in magazines like *Cosmo* or *People*, where there's a very superficial understanding of the dynamics of affairs. I don't know how many reporters I've had ask me over the years, what's the cause of infidelity? As if there is one cause. It's so multi-determined, as Pete was saying in his introduction, in culture, in intrapsychic issues, in interpersonal issues, in timing, all of that. As you're learning about the couple, you are synthesizing all of this to help you figure out how to structure and where you're going to go.

Let's go back to the couple, now.

Dominic: Obviously, a lot of my indiscretions and selfishness and things of that nature stem from my background a little bit.

Arielle: His dad committed suicide in front of a train.

Ellyn: He stepped in front of a train.

Arielle: I can't imagine what that's like. I feel really bad for him.

Ellyn: You care. You care a lot. You really care.

Pete: He jumped in front of the train?

Dominic: Yeah.

Pete: How old were you?

Dominic: 20, almost.

Ellyn: How old are you, now?

Dominic: 29.

Ellyn: It's not that long ago.

Dominic: Yeah. I hadn't talked to him for like three years before he did that. I think my last words were eat shit, or fuck you, or something like that.

My dad an affair on my mom and married the woman that he had the affair with. My whole life growing up, she hated me.

Ellyn: She, your stepmom.

Dominic: Finally, when I got old enough, I understood what was going on, when I was about 15 or 16. I could see what was going on, so I told him fuck you for pretty much letting this happen. Then...

Ellyn: Was the fuck you, fuck you for?

Dominic: Kinda taking her side. And then, I got into a lot of trouble in high school and went to jail for a year.

I didn't talk to him for a year, and then he just showed up at my sentencing. Then, when they gave me the sentence, he just walked out.

I got out of jail and went to college. Completely flipped my life around. Was doing really good in school, and then my mom just called me, like on Friday. She was like, "Hey, I'm here. Where are you?" I was like, why the fuck did you drive way over here?" Then, yeah, she just told me what happened.

But it isn't too fair to her, Ari, for this kind of shit too. It's no excuse for taking her feelings and emotions, and trampling 'em.

Ellyn: I'm hearing what you said... there's part of you that wants to understand.

Dominic: Especially, with all this shit with my dad, and all that stuff. It was hard enough for me, and then just the fact that I let that spill over into her life, kinda.

Ellyn: You said a few minutes ago that you were afraid of commitment. I wonder if it's a few things. I wonder if is it a part of you that wants to commit, and another part that doesn't really want to deal with the repercussions if you do? You're aware of those two parts?

Dominic: Yeah.

Ellyn: You're aware of them pushing and pulling on you?

Dominic: Yeah.

Ellyn: Are you okay for a couple of minutes to do a bit of a dialogue between those parts of yourself?

Dominic: How so? Like stepping outside of myself?

Pete: We all have competing alter egos. There's one part of me that wants to get into good shape for a lot of good reasons, but there's another part of me that wants to indulge in Ben and Jerry's. There is one part of me that wants to save for the future, and another part of me that wants to spend right now. We all have these different alter egos that compete, different set of interests, etc.

Having a dialogue sometimes can make this clearer. The alter ego that says I'm interested in making a greater commitment, why would that part of you be interested in making a greater commitment?

Dominic: To fully indulge in all the positive aspects of life, like having a solid marriage, having kids. All those good things.

Ellyn: You have an image of good things inside of you that wants to commit?

Dominic: Yeah.

Pete: And creating things that you missed out growing up, it would be nice to pass that on. Why else would a commitment be good?

Dominic: I would feel accomplished.

Ellyn: You would feel accomplished?

Dominic: Yeah. I feel like I would set up my lineage. My kids, set them on the right track.

Ellyn: That's a solid good.

Dominic: Yeah. I used to see my friends' families and stuff like that, when I was a little kid. It was much different.

Ellyn: Did you kind of envy that?

Dominic: Yeah.

Ellyn: When you were little, was there a part of you that even wished that someday you could grow up and be like them?

Dominic: Yeah.

Ellyn: You watched, and you looked, and you noticed.

Dominic: Yeah. But then, growing up and doing it is a different story.

Ellyn: It's a lot harder. You sit there and you remember what you wanted as a child, and you think about that feeling of feeling accomplished and that sense of pride you feel when you think about all the things that are on this side.

Dominic: Proud of just the idea. I don't know. It's like puffing out your chest.

Pete: Yeah. Come over here. Sit in this chair. I want to talk to your alter ego.

Ellyn: Okay. Before I get to see him on the other side, I want to talk about a few things that happened in this section of the session.

We learn important, important things about him. Something I would love for a few of you to write in the chat is have you noticed your feelings about him evolving? Many times when I show this tape or have showed it, some people will say they didn't like him at all at the beginning, and then they began to feel compassion, or maybe you still don't like him. But just write a few words in the chat about...

What we're learning about him is that his role model of a father was a man who gave up on his marriage to his mother. He gave up his relationship

with his son, that he married the woman he had an affair with. And in that marriage, there was a real cut-off between Dom and his father. And then, eventually, his father gave up on his life and stepped in front of a train, probably to end the enormous pain that he was in.

This is what in his psyche he's dealing with in his history, and this only nine years ago that this all happened.

Now, you saw me starting to set up a Gestalt piece of two-chair work with him by seeing if there was an internal split there. The question I said to him was is there a part of you that wants to do it differently than your father, and another part that is struggling or...differently.

As he began to talk about why he wanted to do it differently, Pete and I were both taking the time to embellish or draw out that side. The side, the aspiration that he has is to be a better man than his father. It's he wants to feel proud. He wants to have a lineage. He wants to set his kids up in life for a better future than he was set up for.

I don't think it comes across quite as well on the video as it did sitting in the room. But his feelings of if I could do this, I would be very proud, and it is something that he really, really wants to be able to do.

However, he also has spent years numbing himself from the pain and the grief of his father's death and his cutoff with his father, and what that unresolved relationship has been for him.

He's also, as we saw in the very first piece of the tape, he's numbed himself. He's able to be very insular and has a hard time letting himself see the results or being even pushed by his pain to begin to work on it, or deal with it in some way for himself.

Okay. We're going to go back to the video.

Pete: Sit in this chair.

Pete: The alter ego over there was talking about here are all the advantages of making a commitment, being in a committed relationship. And over there, there's a sense of pride and integrity. That alter ego of Dominic's is here are the advantages of commitment. Over here is "This is why I shy away from commitment." What would this guy say over here? Commitment sounds good, but...

Dominic: This is fucked up. Say that it just reverts back to selfishness, I think.

Ellyn: Did you watch your father being selfish and doing what he wanted?

Dominic: No, he hid a lot of that. But when I was old enough, my mom let me know that this was probably the right time to tell me. I asked about my stepmom, and she was like, yeah, he had an affair with her.

And then, I thought was he unhappy with my mom, I saw him really unhappy in his current relationship.

Ellyn: The part of you that makes it okay to be with another girl or woman at some times or three times, or whatever, the part of you that sometimes feel like a commitment is squelching you in some way. Can you let yourself give voice to that side?

It might be hard to do, and it might be especially hard to do in front of Arielle, but a lot of times when we don't give voice to that side, it sneaks around behind-the-scenes and makes mischief. I wonder if you could let yourself give a voice to. I don't know if it says I don't want to be tied down yet, or I don't know if it says I'm scared of the commitment. I don't know what your words are but see if you can let yourself.

Dominic: I don't know. I think it's a huge combination of...

Arielle: Just be honest.

Dominic: Yeah. I think it's a fear of commitment. I think it's a fear of being tied down. I think it's a fear of ending up unhappy. Not that any of these things have been done] by Ari or anything. There's so many negative possibilities maybe.

Ellyn: Like imagining into the future?

Dominic: Yeah.

Pete: Yeah, things that it will cost you, or what you would lose.

Dominic: Yeah.

Pete: Like for example?

Dominic: I don't know. I saw my dad give up a huge piece of who he is. He ended up just living for her and just tiptoeing around to make her happy.

Pete: Wow!

Ellyn: Your stepmom?

Dominic: Yeah. Worked all day. Come home. Do everything he could to make her happy, and it was just never enough.

Ellyn: But he gave up you, your mom, and then what he got was shit, basically. Right?

Arielle: The grass is always greener. The grass is always greener.

Ellyn: Where did you just go? Okay. Take your time.

Dominic: I hate talking about this shit. It makes me feel weak.

Ellyn: It makes you feel weak to be...?

Dominic: It's like everyone has their own issues. It's just like shit, just strikes a chord with me.

Ellyn: He walked away from you. Do you really think it's weak to care about that? To care about losing him?

Dominic: Yeah, I guess. He wasn't there for a large part of me becoming a man, so it's like why should I give a fuck now?

Ellyn: But you know why you give a fuck.

Dominic: Why?

Ellyn: Because you want to be a man. You want to be a real man, not a weak man. You want to be a real man. You are growing into it. It's just that you wanted him to be there. You wanted him to be able to lead you. You wanted him to be able to be that model.

Dominic: When I cheated on her, I put her in this situation. The only reason we're here is because of me, but it all comes back to this. It's like I should just be able to shut the door on that.

I don't know. Maybe I'm just not ready to impact someone else's life.

Arielle: *When we would talk about marriage, he would get angry. He would be like I don't know! We're going to get married. We're going to.*

It would be like we'd talk buying a house. We'd talk about kids. We'd talk about what we were going to name our kids, and it's beautiful and it's beautiful. And it's never, never anger, or pressure, talking about our lives together and building our lives together.

When we traveled and we went to Europe, and we'd see couples in their 80s, kissing and holding hands, and we'd say that's going to be us. When it actually came down to it, the act of we're actually going to do this, and we're going to commit our lives together, he would just get angry.

Ellyn: Okay. If you can, again, write in the chat what stands out to you. You can do it just in a few words, like what are the developmental issues or the emotions that are really standing out to you?

While you're doing that, I'm going to talk a little bit more about the Gestalt two-chair work process that we're using here in this session, and some of the things that stood out to me. But there's a lot in this section, again, which was only about a six-minute long section of this session.

We are working to uncover both sides of his dilemma. What is the resistance that is governing? What is the side? Because he has the aspirational side that wants to be proud, and wants to feel good, that was uncovered earlier. But now, we're also learning about how scary it is to him because of so many things he saw about his father. He saw that he could never make that other woman happy and that no matter what he did, he was miserable. He sees that as a potential in his own future. He is scared to death of ending up unhappy, like his dad.

Another piece that we saw here was how it is the act of making that commitment, the act of actually getting married, which is terrifying him. It's that developmental leap from being single to being married that is just tapping into enormous vulnerability for him. He can't face it. He can't see any what that's he's not going to end up stuck.

What we're doing is exposing the conflict and helping understand that his conflict is internal. It's not a conflict about is she is the right person or not. It's much more a conflict that lives inside of him.

The more we do this and the more we underline parts of that conflict, the conflict becomes clearer to both of them. What was unconscious up until this point is now being made very, very explicit. The more that you're actually able to do that, the easier your work gets, and also the more effective it gets, because the person in his shoes that we're watching is starting to take a lot more ownership of their own conflict. This is just the beginning stages of it.

But the more one partner is able to take ownership of their own conflict, it enables the spouse to stop personalizing it. She can be able to move from he doesn't love me, or why is he doing this to me? To a better understanding of why is he doing this, and what is this about?

He's talking about the anxiety behind the commitment. To him, it symbolizes giving up choices, and giving up many choices, and giving up choices that would potentially make him happy and trading them in for other choices.

All of that says to me, along with everything that we've been describing, is that he does not have a strong enough internal core of differentiation yet to know that he doesn't have to give up things that matter to him, or how to navigate that with her, so that he is not surrendering himself, just as she described that she has done.

We're going to go back now to the tape and see where he goes with this two-chair.

Pete: I have two comments. I'm going to make a speculation about you over here, and a speculation about this guy over there.

The guy over there would be willing to talk about your future. The guy over there would get excited about it, and you would get excited talking to him about it. You would start to feel, oh my God, I've hit the bull's-eye. I've got the jackpot. He wants to. You're both excited about it.

Now, ironically, this guy over here shows up, when he starts caring so much. This guy over here shows up because now I'm screwed from over

here, because this guy over here thinks commitment means I've got to give myself up because I saw that played out. I saw it get played out

Ironically, the closer he gets toward you, the scarier it is for you over here. Would that be fair?

Arielle: It's funny that you say that too because every time he's cheated on me, it's when we're most intimate and happy.

Pete: That's exactly.

Ellyn: Exactly right. Right.

Pete: This guy lets walls down. He gets excited about connecting with you. He loves that connection with you. And then, here comes Mr. Hyde out of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, if you're familiar with that story. Here it comes, it scares the hell out of me. What the hell am I getting into? He says something like that from over here. Would that be fair?

Dominic: Yeah.

Pete: What the hell am I getting into? And then you start acting out. You start going this is great. This is great. When earlier, you said this is so hard to talk about, and I think you're spot on. That guy gets excited about being with you, Arielle. It's so hard from this guy to say, guess what? If I sit over here in this chair, it scares the hell out of me. It scares the hell out of me to have that connection with you. Ironically, it's because I care that it scares me so much when I'm over here. Would that be fair?

Dominic: Yeah.

Pete: It scares the hell out of me.

Dominic: It's just so deep that she doesn't have time for this shit.

Arielle: Well, it was four years of my life.

Pete: She may choose to be in this shit.

Arielle: It just scares me because I know that, so it's like these monumental intimidating moments of my life that I can be pregnant, or having kids, or

getting married. My mind is going to go to we're most intimate now, so is he going to go and be unfaithful?

Pete: That's a legitimate concern. This guy over here gets really scared when he allows himself to feel that connection with you.

Which is about your boundaries then, instead of hoping, praying somehow he will find a resolution between these alter egos, so that you can feel consistent. It's like part of your task, which is not easy, which is where are your boundaries?

Arielle: It's up to him, now. I can't make him choose this person.

Pete: That is correct. You can't make him choose from over here to start all of a sudden supporting him. What Dominic said over here a minute ago was accurate.

Ellyn: It's deep and it's not deep, and I want to go to the not-deep side for a minute, and then go back to the deep side.

The not deep side is that many, many, many, many males who are your age or in their late 20s and early 30s have the conflict. The conflict that you have of wanting to commit and not wanting to commit and having to sort that conflict out. That's a normal conflict for men to have.

When you talk about dragging Arielle through it, yeah, part of what he's dragging you through is also having to face that issue of am I going to learn not to give myself up to a man? Am I going to learn how to be a self, and how to be a person, and how to have my own wishes, and thoughts, and desires, and really keep that self-esteem in the face of a relationship? That's normal growth. That's what every young woman your age should be facing is how am I going to be able to love somebody and still be a person at the same time?

Your stuff is bringing her into a conflict that's part of her own growth, whether she's with or not with you.

Pete: Do you feel anything, as listen to what Ellyn is saying?

Arielle: Yeah, I think it makes sense. Logically, it makes sense.

Pete: And emotionally?

Arielle: Emotionally, not. It's like logically, I know. But I can't help that when we walk into a place and there's other beautiful girls, that my immediate moment is insecurity.

Ellyn: You... That his struggles are about you.

Arielle: No, they're not. Logically, I know that. I know that part of why I've stayed is because I know that he's a good person. I know that.

Pete: He's a good person with a lot of fears from over here.

Arielle: I know all of that. I just think that it's hard to think if he loved me so much.

Ellyn: It's hard to catch up emotionally with what you know, logically, and to know that he's wrestling with his own conflicts that he would be having, no matter who he was with.

Arielle: I know. I know that. I know it's not-

Ellyn: You know it in your head.

Arielle: I know.

Ellyn: Mm-hmm (affirmative). But emotionally.

Arielle: I want to be enough. I want to be enough for him to want to block that out, and choose this, but I can't.

Ellyn: Can I say it to you a different way? See, if he blocked it out, if he blocked this conflict out, if in your fantasy and he loved you enough to do that, it would come back to bite you later because nobody can block out this kind of a trauma. They might be able to block it out for a little while, but it's the resolution of it that makes a difference, not the blocking it out. It's so easy to be in your chair and feel like if only he loved me enough.

Arielle: Yeah.

Ellyn: It's the little girl belief.

Arielle: Yeah, maybe I'm in love with him and he's my person, but I'm just not that girl for him. I don't know.

Ellyn: It's the fairytale fantasy that every girl grows up with. Belief that if we are enough, if we're pretty enough, if we're smart enough, if we're funny enough, then that's going to be enough that our partners aren't going to have their own conflicts. Do you know that every guy has conflicts?

Arielle: Girlfriends of mine who have known guys half as long, they're engaged, they're getting married or whatever. It's like I really can't help but be hurt by it.

Ellyn: You want it. You want it really badly. You want to be able to love him, and have him love you, and have it all go easy and smoothly.

Is there any part of you that knows that the more you can get to that strong sense of yourself, the better you're going to be in the long run? It takes time.

When I say people have conflicts, everybody has their own, whatever they are. Part of growing up, part of making a commitment, part of establishing a relationship, is all about resolving those conflicts and pushing growth in each other and being willing to sign up for the journey.

When you are so, so hard on yourself, you're not accepting the part of yourself that's in a journey that anybody who's alive and awake and willing to go on a journey is going to be having. And so, yeah, there's a part of the deep stuff that you're working on that's important, that you don't want to drag her through.

Dominic: Yeah.

Ellyn: But there's also a part that in that journey and in the conflict that you have that is dragging her to the kind of growth that's important for her too.

Ellyn: Let's switch back.

While I'm switching back again, I ask you to write in the chat about any things that stood out to you in this section. There's just an enormous amount that got covered here, and I want to highlight a few things. But also, please feel free to write anything that stood out to you.

Lincoln: Ellyn, we have some great comments in the chat. We also have some questions. Would you like me to read some of those questions?

Ellyn: I would like it if you would read just a couple of the comments, and a couple of the questions. But I will be finished teaching in about 10 minutes, or 15 max, and then we'll be able to take any. I'll stay on for questions and comments too. But yeah, go ahead and read a little bit.

Lincoln: Great. My question is, she seems like she has gotten many signs that he wasn't ready to commit and has not wanted to hear them. Would you gently confront her about this, and how has this perpetuated the cycle?

Ellyn: Okay. Just read me a few, and I'll integrate it into what I'm going to do.

Lincoln: Okay. How common are affairs, just before an engagement or a marriage?

Ellyn: Very.

And again, please write some more, if you would, while I'm talking about this last section of tape. There is so much that happened here.

It's very common for people to either have affairs just before getting married, or just before getting engaged, or just before having a baby, or right after having a baby because all of those things are so symbolic of, to many people, being trapped, and to being stuck, and to a reduced number of choices in life. Often, that is expressed through having an affair.

Now, in the beginning section of this piece that we just watched, we were laying out some more about this scared side and that. And then, he said something about how it was so deep, which is true. But he said it in a way that was almost persecuting her from a victim position, and she reacted. She was crying, but she was also angry. She said, "I've already invested four years here."

The reality is that she has given herself up so much, and they have had parts of their relationship that is wonderful. They run a business together. They've done well. They've had the promise of a future, but her boundaries are very mushy.

As you see as the tape goes on and I'm talking to her about learning how to hold onto herself and keep her self-esteem and let his struggles be on his side, and let her struggles be on her side. I talked to her about do you know he's wrestling with his own conflicts. Conflicts he would have, no matter who he was with. She's still very stuck in personalizing and seeing that it's about him not loving her enough.

We see here, both of them have the inclination to block out the unresolved drama. He for different reasons than her, but she even said at one point, if he loved me enough, he would block this out. I said if he blocked it out, it would come back around to bite you later, which is true. You can't just completely block out the kind of history that he has with a father who committed suicide. It's just nobody is going to be successfully able to numb themselves and block that out indefinitely.

A lot of what you're seeing is ways of starting to really encapsulate what's his, what's hers, so that each of them can be focusing on what's theirs that's going to enable them both, each of them to grow and develop. And also, to move forward in a different way.

I have here on the slide actually, as long as somebody is personalizing what their partner is doing, their choices become very narrow, very limited, and they just see things through that one small lens. And with that small lens, their own emotional flexibility gets very narrow, and their cognitive flexibility is narrow. They're very locked in. As somebody said in the question Lincoln read, when it's narrow like that, they don't see signs that may be very important for them to see.

When somebody begins to get it in their guts and in their bones that it's not personal, then a lot of things open up. One of the things that opens up is they can actually adopt the position, why are you doing this? Help me understand, or let me understand you better, rather than why are you doing this to me? Which brings it back to it's about me, which protects the other person from looking at themselves.

The other thing is she's stuck in a lonely, hopeless, waiting position. She said at one point, I don't remember if I got it down, but she says that's up to him as if she has no place in it. It's very much up to her. It's up to her, whether she's going to do her own work. It's up to her, whether she's going to wait. It's up to her whether she's going to be able to say to him this is so powerful, and I don't want the rest of my life, when we're having kids, when we're getting married, I don't want to have to be worried about you having another affair or some kind of acting out. I'm not going to stay here indefinitely. I'm not going to be here if you don't do your work. The point is how many options get opened once somebody stops taking it personally.

When you're able to move a couple into what I call more of stage two work in working with infidelity, they know what their individual issues are, and

they start working those issues. And in that process, they develop much, much, much higher capacity... ambiguity, for tolerating anxiety and strengthening their own process of differentiation and reducing their emotional reactivity.

The partner who's had the affair really does need to be able to wrestle with deciding to deceive you. The deception here did not go on for very long. In some cases, you have enormous felony lies and telling partners they're crazy when they're suspicious. The amount and kind of deception is going to determine how much work needs to be done around the actual process of deception.

The partner who lied is going to be accounting for that decision to deceive and really understanding the significant events that impacted the decision to have the affair.

Let's go back to now to seeing the end of the video, and it's about four more minutes long.

Pete: Is there anything from over here from the guy that would like to make a commitment? Is there anything that this alter ego would say to this guy over here? Is there anything that you would say to him from the chair that you're in?

Dominic: Leave me the fuck alone. I'm a goddamn schizophrenic. I'm a fuckin' lunatic.

I know what's healthy, and I know what's good for me. I know what the possibilities are. I know he shows up, like we said.

Ellyn: But there is a voice over there that says leave me alone?

Dominic: Yeah.

Ellyn: And I know what's healthy and good.

Dominic: Yeah.

Pete: You have years of conditioning over here. Years of self-protective laws built up. Years of independence. Years of fear of losing too much with a commitment. He rattles the cage a lot.

Dominic: Yeah. Oh, man.

Ellyn: *(talking to Pete)* I feel the urgency for some decision to get made that they're each expressing in different ways. I also wonder what it would be like to take the pressure off of that decision for defined period of time because the conflict is so much on the surface now in terms of the part of him that wants to be a different kind of a man than his father. It seems like that is so much on the surface now, that if he were to stick with that and really wrestle with getting through it, they would both be able to make a better decision.

Ellyn: What I would say to you is that I have enormous respect for both of you. There are very few people as young as you are that are willing to face this kind of stuff.

I would love to see you find a way, if it works for you, to take the pressure off the decision a little longer. But also, know that you're going to work really hard over the next couple of months to find the answer, one way or the other, but not to make it quick to avoid the pain that you're in, right this minute.

Dominic: That makes sense to me.

Ellyn: Arielle's clear she loves you. She would like to be with you, but I do think it would be really helpful to take the pressure off for a little while and just say we're not taking the pressure off of dealing with the conflicts. The conflict for you is how do I touch back to the real me? Yours is really much more of how do I deal with the kind of man I want to be? It's not right now the decision of whether you want to be together or not be together, it's how do we resolve these two issues? And then, make a better decision.

Pete: You guys want to come back again? The reason you would say yes is what?

Arielle: I think was the most influential therapy session that we've ever had together, I would say. The most real.

Pete: Real in the sense of what, Ari?

Arielle: Being in touch with what's going on inside, I think. Understanding, I guess.

Pete: Dominic, you're willing to come back because?

Dominic: I like to cry on camera.

Thank you both. I appreciate it. Thank you.

Ellyn: Love it again, if you'd take a few minutes and write in the chat, any of your emotional responses as this session ends. What stood out? But also, mostly your own emotional experience at the end.

I'll just summarize: we were wrapping up the session, encouraging them not to make impulsive decisions, to make it much clearer that they each had individual work to do, and that the focus needed to be on some of that individual work, and not the rush to end the pain of uncertainty of what was going to happen to their relationship.

As you go through work with a couple like this, you're going to be constantly interrupting hurtful defensive interactions. He talked often about hiding and running away from his vulnerability, and there will be a lot of vulnerability in the work that's ahead.

You're looking all the time at is this couple more capable of being direct, of being honest, of facing the things that are going on, and not hiding from them. You want to see an increasing level of commitment to either conflict avoiding solutions, or avoidance solutions, or symbiotic solutions to problems. You'll see increasingly high tolerance for growth, and you'll get to watch it unfold, right in front of you.

Using the Gestalt two-chair work is a really powerful way to make your work a lot easier, and make it more effective, but there's so much more ownership of the issues, and the client begins to understand the issues in their own language, in their own internal experience, and it's getting externalized, instead of spinning inside of them.

I want to end with one little thing, which Heinz Kohut said: "The mark of a great marriage is when only one person goes crazy at a time." And for all couples, often when infidelity takes place, it does feel like somebody has gone crazy or even the betrayed partner, they can both feel crazy. Our job is to steady the system, and to be that force that helps them locate what's in each of them, help them really decide whether they're going to work or not, and what the commitment is that they have to themselves first, and to the work as a couple.

Like I said at the beginning, I love this work because it is very powerful work and it is work. But because of the crisis, you get to see so much beautiful, beautiful work unfolding in front of you.

I am going to go back to putting me on the screen, I think.

Okay. Can you see me?

Lincoln: Yep.

Ellyn: All righty.

We are officially done, but not officially done in the sense that I'm here to respond to questions about this webinar. Not questions about every single thing about couples therapy you've ever wanted to ask, but definitely here to talk about anything that came up for you, or anything that you liked, or saw, or learned.

Let's see. I just saw Mark's comment, where he says, "I feel empathy for her. She stayed with him despite because she knows the pain he carries." That's true. She has a lot of love for him, absolutely.

Somebody wrote about how he got off the hook by making the joke at the end. Yeah, he did get off the hook a little bit, but it had been such an intense session and it was ending. To us, I think the humor felt like a transition to going out into the world.

We do want to have people raise their hands maybe, Lincoln, for those who want to come in and actually talk about anything?

Lincoln: That sounds great. If you'd like to ask us a question, we can bring you in live if you use the raise your hand feature. I see Nissa. I'll just bring her in.

Ellyn: Hi.

Nissa: Hi, Ellyn.

Ellyn: Hi.

Nissa: I was curious about this reflective theme a little bit. About the reflective theme thing that you did with Peter, that you've discussed their case in front of them, right?

Ellyn: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Nissa: Is that something that you do? I'm just curious about that part because that was interesting.

Ellyn: Yeah, we do that a lot actually. We don't work together all the time because it's not practical. But when we do work together, we do talk to each other a lot, and there's a couple of reasons for that.

One is it's easy for each of us to have our own minds made up about a direction we want to go in. And if we're pulling in two different directions, it can be very confusing for couples. That's one reason, to sort out who is going to lead and who is going to follow.

But beyond that, one of the things we learned early on, running a lot of couples workshops, was how much the couple benefited from watching us work out something between us. When we don't agree or we're not sure, and they get to see us talking to each other, it's like being a kid with the parents. Where instead of the parents being scary when they disagree, there is safety in knowing that it's going to get worked out.

Nissa: Wonderful! Would you do something like that if you are not with Peter? Would you speak aloud about your thinking process, something like that?

Ellyn: Sometimes I do. Sometimes I say, oh wait, let's slow down. I want to think out loud with you for a minute because I'm having a sense of two different directions to go, or I need to sit for a minute to see what I think. Yeah, I'll process stuff out loud like that.

Nissa: Okay. Thank you.

Ellyn: You're welcome. Good to see you.

Nissa: Good to see you too.

Lincoln: We have Auric. Hi, there.

Auric: Hi, Ellyn. Hi. My question is would you then work with them in individual sessions as well? And how do you structure that in terms of not keeping secrets, or whatever, and seeing them individually and as a couple, or would you just keep all the work with them coming as a couple, but try to do individual work as part of that couple session?

Ellyn: Okay. You're asking a really great question, which could take me a long time to answer, but I'll give you some pieces of the answer.

Which is, this couple isn't married. They don't have children. They haven't made a commitment, and they have a lot of pretty deep significant issues.

I encouraged them to do some individual work with therapists that we knew, and to continue to also do some couples work, while that decision gets made, and while they're figuring themselves out. I might do it very differently with a couple who have a long-term marriage or have young children. And then, the integration of the individual and couples sessions becomes tricky. But also, how you set up the confidentiality map. This is something we talk a lot about in my training program because some therapists feel very strongly about having no secrets at all, and some therapists feel very strongly about having an open secrets policy.

One of the things I like to do, when it's appropriate, when I can, is have the couple make that decision in front of me. So that before I see anybody individually, I'll ask them to really work that through themselves.

That's a brief answer, but it gives you a little bit to go on.

Auric: Thank you.

Ellyn: You're welcome.

Lincoln: Great. We have one from John.

Ellyn: Hi, John.

John: Hi. How are you?

Ellyn: Good. How are you?

John: I am well. Thank you. My concern is for in this case, a husband and wife who've been married a long time. Wife has an affair. Comes back. The husband learns a lot of details about their sex acts, and subsequently has nightmares, intrusive ruminations about those details, and interferes with their being able to recover their own sexual intimacy because he is reminded of what she told him about her other partner.

I didn't see this in the context of this session. I'm just wondering where and how you put an end to that because he is just coming in to see me the first time. The husband is just totally overwhelmed by these floods of triggers. Every time he sees somebody who looks like the affair partner, every time he sees something else or hears a song or whatever that reminds him, he just goes into shutdown. And then, he really uses some very graphic and harmful language probably in talking with his wife about what's feeling.

Ellyn: Yeah. You're describing a lot of things. One is it's a relatively recent discovery, it sounds like. He's got PTSD.

John: Yeah. Which given that he wants to work with that might be more useful to use some EMDR in conjunction with the couples work. The other thing is that often... I mean it's unfortunate when... I don't like to have people share all of the details, graphic details of their sexual experiences with other people just for this very reason.

John: Right.

Ellyn: That it is going to be destructive.

John: You can't un-know what you know.

Ellyn: Right, right. But it speaks to her hostility to him in terms of all that sharing and an affair on top of it, so she's got some significant work to do to acknowledge what in the world was going on with her, and why.

The other thing is that often when somebody is ruminating, there is a good reason for some of the rumination. Not only the graphic details, but they know they don't know something, or the whole story either.

I want to take some other questions, but thank you very much for speaking up.

John: Okay. Thank you for your answer.

Ellyn: Sure.

I see Lori. Hi, Lori.

Lori: Hi, Ellyn. I had kind of a comment and a question. First of all, I was really impressed with the work you and Pete did in such a short amount of time, it was amazing to see what unfolded. Thank you for presenting that here.

I guess my question was because I can't even imagine what it was like in the room. It was so poignant just seeing it on video, just the emotion and the intensity.

But when you and Pete were doing the two-chair with Ari and Dom, were you... I know she was still personalizing a lot, but did you notice that she was actually able to empathize and see that he was actually... Being able to see that part and be aware of that part of him, the fear? I don't know if she was able to hold onto that, or was she?

Ellyn: My sense of it was she was starting to get it cognitively, but not emotionally.

Lori: Right.

Ellyn: She hadn't caught up to it emotionally yet, and you can't expect that. Somebody who's been highly enmeshed for a long time, then when you begin to separate it out like this, they start to see. But it takes a while until they get, oh yeah, this is really located over there. It's not in me.

Lori: Yeah. It sure is a great place to start at least. I was really impressed with Dom's amazing ability to just allow himself to be that vulnerable, but that's it. Thank you so much.

Ellyn: Thank you. Yeah. Thanks, glad to see you here.

Lincoln: Ellyn, I'm not seeing any hands raised, but I do have some questions in the chat.

Ellyn: Okay. Go ahead, sure.

Lincoln: What do you say to a spouse, who wants to leave or separate for a while because they think the individual work they need to do can happen easier being separated?

Ellyn: I think sometimes that's true. Every case is a case-by-case situation. But one of the reasons that is sometimes true is that it takes out the interpersonal intensity of coming home and fighting, and it gives the

person more of an opportunity to really self-examine and figure out what they want and how they're going to move forward.

Now, sometimes somebody is doing that because they're actually continuing the affair, and they don't want to be honest about it. You have to be sure what you're dealing with as you navigate that kind of a separation.

Lincoln: Great. There's another question. Did you directly ask Arielle to not talk during the exercise? I did not remember that.

Ellyn: I don't think so. I don't really remember. It's not on the tape, so I didn't do it on the tape. This is edited, like a longer session into 35 minutes. I think we kind of encouraged her to stay quiet and let him do the two-chair work.

Lincoln: Great. Can you elaborate on why infidelity happens in highly enmeshed couples?

Ellyn: Yeah. And again, there's not just one reason. But in highly enmeshed couples, one of the most common reasons for infidelity is somebody is trying to disrupt a longer-term symbiosis, and they don't know how to do it verbally. They don't know how to express their desires, and so they go out and create a crisis by having an affair.

Lincoln: Great. What do you do when the cheater has substance abuse issues?

Ellyn: If there's significant substance abuse issues, those need to come first, ideally. Somebody who's abusing substances isn't responsible for what they do when they're high. You can't get any kind of agreement or understanding that they are going to be reliable.

Lincoln: There's another question. How do you handle if one partner isn't willing to access their own internal issues, and just blames the cheating partner and their issues?

Ellyn: If somebody is really, really, really unwilling, especially when... The person who has cheated can go first in terms of beginning to address their issues. When it doesn't work, then I've done a number of different things. There are times when I've said it seems like you're not here to work. So either you can sit and observe the work your partner is doing for a while, but we're not focused on you because you're not willing to work. Or what's more common is that betrayed partner is so hurt, and so angry, and they

are just avoiding that pool, that depth of pain. Sometimes I'll do individual sessions with them to have them be more accessible and more open to starting to do some work in a couples context.

We'll take maybe two or three more, and then wrap up.

Lincoln: Right. Do you think that Dom used his experience related to his father to distract her from his decisions and behaviors?

Ellyn: No, I don't. I think his experience with his father is something that he's been running from for nine years, and it's finally on the surface.

Lincoln: Okay. Now, how about this for the last one? What do you do when the betrayed partner cannot contain themselves, while you try to work with their partner?

Ellyn: I do a lot of things, first. Working with breathing, working with them sitting beside me, working with them turning their back. There are some situations, where you can't work with both people in the room at the same time because they just will not contain it at all. And then, I have had a few situations where I've told couples that they aren't ready for couples therapy yet. So then you are going to subdivide it into individual therapy.

Let's just wrap up and say, again, I respect those of you who are here and using your Friday afternoon this way. As you're leaving in a couple minutes, you can still write anything you either learned, or want to take away, or want to try out, or appreciations to the couple, or me, or whatever. Feel free to write something on your way out.

I do love teaching and training couples therapists, and I think we are privileged, amazingly privileged to be able to do the work that we do. Thank you all and I look forward to seeing many of you in another context, another time.