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What Sleeping With Married Men Taught Me About Infidelity

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Brian Rea

I'm not sure it's possible to justify my liaisons with married men, but what I learned from having them warrants discussion. Not between the wives and me, though I would be interested to hear their side. No, this discussion should happen between wives and husbands, annually, the way we inspect the tire tread on the family car to avoid accidents.

A few years ago, while living in London, I dated married men for companionship while I processed the grief of being newly divorced. I hadn't sought out married men specifically. When I created a profile on Tinder and OkCupid, saying I was looking for no-strings-attached encounters, plenty of single men messaged me and I got together with several of them. But many married men messaged me too.

After being married for 23 years, I wanted sex but not a relationship. This is dicey because you can't always control emotional attachments when body chemicals mix, but with the married men I guessed that the fact that they had wives, children and mortgages would keep them from going overboard with their affections. And I was right. They didn't get overly attached, and neither did I. We were safe bets for each other.

I was careful about the men I met. I wanted to make sure they had no interest in leaving their wives or otherwise threatening all they had built together. In a couple of cases, the

men I met were married to women who had become disabled and could no longer be sexual, but the husbands remained devoted to them.

All told I communicated with maybe a dozen men during that time in my life, and had sex with fewer than half. Others I texted or talked with, which sometimes felt nearly as intimate.

Before I met each man I would ask: “Why are you doing this?” I wanted assurance that all he desired was sex.

What surprised me was that these husbands weren’t looking to have more sex. They were looking to have any sex.

I met one man whose wife had implicitly consented to her husband having a lover because she was no longer interested in sex, at all. They both, to some degree, got what they needed without having to give up what they wanted. But the other husbands I met would have preferred to be having sex with their wives. For whatever reason, that wasn’t happening.

I know what it feels like to go off sex, and I know what it’s like to want more than my partner. It’s also a tall order to have sex with the same person for more years than our ancestors ever hoped to live. Then, at menopause, a woman’s hormones suddenly drop and her desire can wane.

At 49, I was just about there myself, and terrified of losing my desire for sex. Men don’t have this drastic change. So we have an imbalance, an elephant-size problem, so burdensome and shameful we can scarcely muster the strength to talk about it.

Maybe the reason some wives aren’t having sex with their husbands is because, as women age, we long for a different kind of sex. I know I did, which is what led me down this path of illicit encounters. After all, nearly as many women are initiating affairs as men.

If you read the work of Esther Perel, the author of the recently published book “State of Affairs,” you’ll learn that, for many wives, sex outside of marriage is their way of

breaking free from being the responsible spouses and mothers they have to be at home. Married sex, for them, often feels obligatory. An affair is adventure.

Meanwhile, the husbands I spent time with would have been fine with obligatory sex. For them, adventure wasn't the main reason for their adultery.

The first time I saw my favorite married man pick up his pint of beer, the sleeve of his well-tailored suit pulled back from his wrist to reveal a geometric kaleidoscope of tattoos. He was cleanshaven and well mannered with a little rebel yell underneath. The night I saw the full canvas of his tattoo masterpiece, we drank prosecco, listened to '80s music and, yes, had sex. We also talked.

I asked him: "What if you said to your wife, 'Look, I love you and the kids but I need sex in my life. Can I just have the occasional fling or a casual affair?'"

He sighed. "I don't want to hurt her," he said. "She's been out of the work force for 10 years, raising our kids and trying to figure out what she wants to do with her life. If I asked her that kind of question, it would kill her."

"So you don't want to hurt her, but you lie to her instead. Personally, I'd rather know."

Well, *maybe* I would rather know. My own marriage had not broken up over an affair so I couldn't easily put myself in her position.

"It's not necessarily a lie if you don't confess the truth," he said. "It's kinder to stay silent."

"I'm just saying I couldn't do that. I don't want to be afraid of talking honestly about my sex life with the man I'm married to, and that includes being able to at least raise the subject of sex outside of marriage."

"Good luck with that!" he said.

"We go into marriage assuming we'll be monogamous," I said, "but then we get restless. We don't want to split up, but we need to feel more sexually alive. Why break up the family if we could just accept the occasional affair?"

He laughed. “How about we stop talking about it before this affair stops being fun?”

I never convinced any husband that he could be honest about what he was doing. But they were mostly good-natured about it, like a patient father responding to a child who keeps asking, “Why, why, why?”

Maybe I was being too pragmatic about issues that are loaded with guilt, resentment and fear. After all, it’s far easier to talk theoretically about marriage than to navigate it. But my attitude is that if my spouse were to need something I couldn’t give him, I wouldn’t keep him from getting it elsewhere, as long as he did so in a way that didn’t endanger our family.

I suppose I would hope his needs would involve fishing trips or beers with friends. But sex is basic. Physical intimacy with other human beings is essential to our health and well-being. So how do we deny such a need to the one we care about most? If our primary relationship nourishes and stabilizes us but lacks intimacy, we shouldn’t have to destroy our marriage to get that intimacy somewhere else. Should we?

I didn’t have a full-on affair with the tattooed husband. We slept together maybe four times over a few years. More often we talked on the phone. I never felt possessive, just curious and happy to be in his company.

After our second night together, though, I could tell this was about more than sex for him; he was desperate for affection. He said he wanted to be close to his wife but couldn’t because they were unable to get past their fundamental disconnect: lack of sex, which led to a lack of closeness, which made sex even less likely and then turned into resentment and blame.

We all go through phases of wanting it and not wanting it. I doubt most women avoid having sex with their husbands because they lack physical desire in general; we are simply more complex sexual animals. Which is why men can get an erection from a pill but there’s no way to medically induce arousal and desire in women.

I am not saying the answer is non-monogamy, which can be rife with risks and unintended entanglements. I believe the answer is honesty and dialogue, no matter how frightening. Lack of sex in marriage is common, and it shouldn’t lead to shame and

silence. By the same token, an affair doesn't have to lead to the end of a marriage. What if an affair — or, ideally, simply the urge to have one — can be the beginning of a necessary conversation about sex and intimacy?

What these husbands couldn't do was have the difficult discussion with their wives that would force them to tackle the issues at the root of their cheating. They tried to convince me they were being kind by keeping their affairs secret. They seemed to have convinced themselves. But deception and lying are ultimately corrosive, not kind.

In the end, I had to wonder if what these men couldn't face was something else altogether: hearing why their wives no longer wanted to have sex with them. It's much easier, after all, to set up an account on Tinder.

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