

**“Affairs in Couples Therapy”
February 21, 2006 Teleseminar
with Dr. Ellyn Bader and Dr. Peter Pearson**

Zoe: Welcome everyone. My name is Zoe Laidlaw. I work with Dr. Bader and Dr. Pearson and I am really pleased that you are all able to join us this evening for an hour on “Affairs in Couples Therapy.” It’s a real honor to introduce Dr. Ellyn Bader and Dr. Peter Pearson. Many of you have trained with them before but since we do have a lot of new people with us this evening, I wanted to say just a few words about them.

Pete and Ellyn introduced the developmental model of couples therapy in a book they wrote in the 80’s called, “In Quest Of The Mythical Mate.” That book earned an award from the California Association of Marriage and Family Therapists for its outstanding contribution to the field, and it’s still used today in graduate schools and training programs across the country. In fact it’s in its 14th printing, and as you know, the developmental model of couples therapy is now widely accepted as a cornerstone of couples therapy.

So they were really pioneers in this field and have continued to be leaders and innovators. They are always developing new tools and techniques and searching for ways to share them with other therapists, which brings us to tonight’s call, because here we are together on a teleseminar call. Doesn’t that make all of us a bit like pioneers and innovators too? I mean this call is kind of high tech.

I have pressed the mute button so that we won’t hear any background noise while Pete and Ellyn are presenting. But at some point they may ask for comments from participants, and I will just push another button that will make it possible for you all to share your answers.

So, I think that’s it. Okay, Pete and Ellyn. Shall we begin?

Ellyn: Let’s do it. Maurice Chevalier once said that we pick our partners in dimmer lights than we would ever pick our wardrobes, and in fact the same is often true with affairs. People pick their affair partners very quickly and without much awareness about the trauma that it may wreak in their primary relationship.

In fact some statistics say, fewer than 50 percent of all marriages are monogamous over the course of the marriage. Now that’s not the same as saying that half the marriages have an affair, because some people have three or four marriages and multiple affairs, but it’s still a very high statistic. And it says a lot about why so many couples come to therapy to see us in the aftermath of an affair.

So, one purpose of our call tonight actually is to help you feel stronger, surer, and more clear about where you plant your own feet when you are working with a couple, and how you can take a leadership role, helping the couple come to terms with the trauma and the aftermath of an affair.

What we are going to do tonight is to talk some about principles involved in how you assess an affair and also look at the different stages of treatment when you are working with the couple where there has been an affair. And when we speak about an affair, what we are talking about is when one partner secretly violates an actual or an implied expectation of the other's primacy.

Peter: Well, it's not just a challenge for the couple when there is an affair going on, because if you are like Ellyn or if you are like me, it's a real challenge sitting in the office with the couple who has an affair is going on. You have to sit there with a lot of pain, and there is no quick relief for that pain.

Also for a lot of therapists, it's not just a clinical issue. The act of having an affair is a moral and ethical problem as well. And in that sense, it often forces us to clarify what we really think and believe on the complexities of affairs and the different kinds of affairs. And we have to start getting clear on that within ourselves, so we can help the couple sort through these really complex issues.

Let me just start with an overall view, a view from the balcony so to speak, about couples relationships in general and affairs in particular. It's a way of looking at relationships that helps me when I describe it to couples. It makes a lot of sense to them and it makes the job of working with the couple a lot simpler, not necessarily easier but simpler.

It starts when two people get together and they form a committed relationship. At the time when they form a committed relationship, what they are essentially doing is drawing a boundary around that relationship.

I tell couples you can think of this boundary kind of like a bubble. Inside the bubble it's really important to feel safe, psychologically and emotionally. If both people can feel psychologically and emotionally safe inside that bubble then it's much easier to support individual differences. It's easier to have disagreements, it's easier to have arguments, because inside that bubble they will learn how to repair ruptures when they happen and create a safe foundation.

And then I go on and use another analogy that, a committed couple has so many interdependencies – far more than any other relationship we will ever be in. And because they have so many interdependencies, at times, it's almost like they are in a three legged race, where what happens to one person profoundly affects the other person, just like that three legged race.

It really doesn't serve the partner well if one person is depleted, exhausted, depressed and totally gives themselves up. Nor does it serve the three legged race couple.

Or, if one person says, "Okay, I will be the boss and you do what I tell you," in that situation, what you have is a pilot and a passenger instead of a pilot and a co-pilot. And if you just have a passenger in a long journey, when you hit a lot of turbulence you really need a co-pilot, not just to help keep things steady but also to help enjoy the journey together as well.

It seems to make sense to couples when I talk about the interdependency from that perspective. And then when it comes to the notion of affairs in particular, one of the bigger problems often is that the person who has had the affair will start to down-play or minimize the effect of the affair on their partner. They'll say, "Well, just get over it, let it go will you? I am – let's just move beyond it."

I have looked for a lot of analogies to try to get the person who had the affair to really understand the importance of what they have done without minimizing it. And the analogy that I have come up with that seems to make the most sense and really get their attention, is the notion of when two people create a start up company. They talk about their dreams, what they want to create, what they want to do, and how they want to be. And they each invest a lot if they are both committed to a start up company.

And then when time passes and the company starts to struggle, if one person discovers their partner has been embezzling and taking funds out of the company, that throws everything into turmoil. Everything now is in question, about whether or not we want to even maintain this company together! I can't really fire a partner, we have to find a way either to dismantle the company or to work it out and the stakes are high because we have each invested so much.

And sometimes it's even worse, if the person who has done the embezzling has been taking funds and precious time and energy and investing it into a rival start-up company, and that makes the pain even worse and the decisions even harder to figure out what to do. And it takes a long time to regain trust.

If the person who's done the embezzling says to their partner, "Well, why don't you go home? I have to work late tonight and take care of some things."

Or "It's been a long time, Terry, since you had a vacation, so why don't you take a couple of weeks in Hawaii and I will take care of things here on the home front?"

Everything that happens, even if it's intended as support and goodwill, gets put under the microscope of suspicion and what are they really trying to tell me. Can I really take a vacation? Can I relax when I'm on vacation or when I go home early and they are working late?

It takes a long time to regain that trust to decide whether or not you are going to re-commit your valuable time, energy, resources and money to build a new or not. That analogy seems to register with people who have had affairs and have tried to deny the effect or the importance on their partner.

Ellyn: In fact for many it took a lot of soul searching to make the original commitment. And once they made the commitment they believed it was a commitment for life. Then when the affair happens, all the years and all the efforts are thrown up in the air.

I like to re-define it not so much as the re-establishing of trust but the need to make a new decision about whether in fact we are a couple or aren't we, and whether we are going to put a boundary around the two of us as a couple again or not.

I want to talk about some of the areas that I use to evaluate the meaning of an affair, because that helps me figure out interventions that I can use with the couple.

There are several areas that I look at: I look at the historical evolution of the relationship, the developmental stage of the relationship at the time the affair took place, the individual dynamics of each partner, the timing of the affair, the type of affair, the length of the affair, the number of affairs, and the type of betrayal and the type of deceit. I'll go through each of those a little bit more in detail with you.

When I look at the history of the relationship, I am looking at how long has the couple been together, how did they originally form the initial bond and how strong was the bond, did they make a conscious commitment, did they establish a strong commitment publicly in a wedding ceremony or did they have a commitment that they made to each other for monogamy when they decided to live together?

I am also looking at the history of fidelity, was this the first affair or not, and positive and negative aspects in the couple's history.

But most importantly I am really trying to see the developmental stage of the relationship. I believe strongly that affairs are a reflection of the developmental stage and that frequently they occur in the context of failed differentiation..

I can't go through our whole developmental model tonight. I am hoping that most of you are pretty familiar with it, but I am going to highlight some of the most common stages for affairs to take place.

One of those is that you may have a long-term conflict avoiding symbiotic relationship in a couple and over the years, each partner has avoided differentiation, avoided conflicts, not addressed things directly with each other. Gradually the relationship has eroded and they live in a kind of quiet tension with each other.

In this case an affair can be designed to create a crisis and in fact may represent an actual high commitment to the marriage or the relationship but it's a crisis designed to disrupt a long-term symbiosis. Another common stage...

Peter: Let me just make one more comment about a conflict avoiding couple. When I see a conflict avoiding couple, I will often share this example to them. I had a couple in my practice one time, both of them really, really avoided disagreements.

The husband, in a brilliant statement of self awareness said to his wife, "You know, we don't fight. And you know that I don't like to argue or disagree. But the problem is, that makes me an unsafe partner to be with. The reason it makes me an unsafe partner is because you really don't know when I agree with you, whether I agree because I want to do it or whether I am agreeing just to avoid a conflict."

He continued, "Because of that, you really never know what my true values or

beliefs or priorities are. And in that sense, it makes me an unsafe partner to be with."

And she looked to him and she said, "I really, really am glad you said that because I had this annoying sense of unease between us but I never could put my finger on it and you just nailed it."

Ellyn: A second common developmental stage for affairs to take place is what we call the symbiotic practicing couple. This is the couple where one partner is wanting lots more independence and autonomy, and the other partner is trying to maintain the initial symbiotic relationship.

In this type of couple frequently there have been failed attempts at differentiation on the part of the practicing partner but they weren't able to hold on to their wants, their desires, and actively create a differentiation phase. And so they begin to pull away. The affair can actually be had by either partner.

The practicing partner may have the affair as a way of saying, "I don't need you, I am independent, I am out in the world, I am doing my own thing." But I have also seen couples where the symbiotic partner is the one who has an affair out of fear that they are losing the other.

In one case the male partner had an affair with a woman who was dying of cancer. He wanted to feel needed again and so he moved in to take care of the woman who was dying.

In any case, I strongly suggest that you ask yourself, "Where is this couple's development arrested?" That would be a primary part of how you frame the treatment.

Another area that I look at is the individual dynamics of each partner and what is it about them individually that may have played a part in the affair taking place.

Do we have, for example, a narcissistic partner whose whole self esteem is sexualized and they are repetitively looking for other partners who boost their ego?

Do we have an unconscious replay of a family pattern when somebody comes out of a family where back through several generations there is a history of affairs?

Or, do we may have a passive aggressive partner who expresses their anger sexually?

The affair maybe a homosexual affair and an experiment in a desire to begin to acknowledge or come out as gay or lesbian..

There can be early trauma, an early history of sexual abuse that is being played out in some way in the affair that's taking place.

So be sure to look for early life-script decisions that may contribute to the meaning of this particular affair.

The timing of the affair is also critical because often an affair represents some aspect of an existential crisis. You could have the timing take place if somebody is really into mid life, they are aging and they are afraid they are leaving youth behind.

Or the timing can be after the birth of a child where the mother gets very attached to the infant, the father feels left out and goes and has an affair.

It's not uncommon for affair to take place when ones spouse is very ill.

Or recently, I worked with a couple where he was part of a start-up company that was going public. He was so involved in work and she was feeling left out and angry that she was so left out.

Peter: I had a couple in my practice where he had an affair shortly after they were married. Looking at his individual history revealed that he really had never attached with anyone in his life. He got attached with his fiancée, got married and then panicked because he thought he was going to lose his freedom and get smothered.

Ellyn: Another common time is when there is an unmourned death or an unmourned loss. Another man had an affair after his mother-in-law died. He was very, very close to his mother-in-law and he saw the woman that he was having the affair with actually as a replacement for his mother-in-law.

It can also be to ward off the depression of an empty nest or an empty marriage.

I also look at the type of affair it is. Affairs can fall on a continuum from a very, very high commitment to the marriage actually, all the way to a lack of commitment to the marriage. I want to begin to figure that out pretty early in the therapy.

Often the partners who feel the most betrayed know that the affair symbolized a very low commitment to the marriage, and sometimes the partners who don't want to reveal much or don't want to talk about it much may indeed have a high commitment to the marriage.

Peter: If we go back to the notion of a boundary or a bubble around the couple, I will tell the couple in the office that the affair is really an assault on that boundary and it's a very powerful assault. It creates a huge injury to that boundary and because of that it takes a long time to repair it.

Ellyn: Some of the early decisions that somebody may have made as a child that get played out in an affair are things like, "I will get even with you."

Or sometimes the sneaky adolescent who likes to play "you can't catch me" or

"I will get what you won't give me," and often it's easier to sneak than it is to be self-defined.

Another time for an affair to take place is awhile after one partner makes a unilateral decision not to have sex in the marriage and then denies the significance of this or denies that it should bother the partner and sometimes gets touchy, when this is described as a problem. If the spouse has feelings of loss of a sexual connection or attraction for somebody else or wants even to talk about it and they will just say, "No, I don't want to have sex and I don't want to talk about it."

Peter: Do you, Ellyn, when you are working with a couple, help that couple clarify any combination of these reasons as you work with them?

Ellyn: Yes, absolutely. Not only clarify them but make them very explicit. We will talk more about that when we get into the different stages of treatment.

But a couple of more areas that add to the assessment that are pretty crucial are the length of the affair and the number of affairs. A quick one night stand is a lot different than the person who has had multiple ongoing affairs, who may have a sexual addiction or who may have had an affair for many, many years that they hid and told a lot of lies to cover up and hide.

And you also want to look at the type of betrayal and the type of deceit. It's very different. There is a continuum, I think, between an affair that took place with some unknown person far away and was probably more of a one night stand, to an affair that took place with somebody that the spouse knows. Particularly when it's a best friend or a family member, it is extremely, extremely painful.

Also you have to look at, was the health of the spouse jeopardized? Did the person go to prostitutes or have a mistress and what kind of safe sex or unsafe sex was involved?

And what kind of injury is actually done to the partner? Sometimes there is herpes. Sometimes there is a child that comes out of the affair and the partner ends up having to support a child in another relationship. So there may be a financial implication to the affair.

And I do want to look at the continuum of lies. So were there actually no lies, were there lies of omission, or was there lots of lying and sneaking around?

And even worse, were there repeated lies and denials even when the spouse guessed? If the spouse guessed and asked questions and they were told that they are crazy and they keep on acting like it doesn't exist even when there is a lot of suspicion, then there is also an assault on the sanity of the partner. There is a theory in transactional analysis of first, second and third degree games. A first degree affair would be one that is like a one night stand where the partner may not tell, they may never tell, it may not interfere much with the marriage and it really isn't that disruptive to the couple.

A second degree affair would include lots of deception. It would involve perhaps an affair with a secretary, a best friend, or a family member. And the third degree affair would be the one that is life threatening and leads to financial ruin, pregnancy or a triangle fight situation where somebody ends up dead.

In fact there is an execution about to happen in California next week that has played out over 15 or 16 years in which a man who is in prison about to be executed hired somebody to kill the woman who was involved with his lover so that he could have him all to himself.

Sometimes it's interesting to look a little bit at Bill Clinton and his situation with Monica Lewinsky because it represents a number of these things I have been talking about.

Clinton seems to have a family script that made him susceptible to getting involved with Monica. He had a predisposition historically to addiction, a life growing up in a family with addiction, he had a life time behavioral pattern of previous infidelity and he had in fact suffered from major losses just before his involvement with Monica.

He lost his mother. He had been close to Ron Brown, congressman in California who had died. Rabin in Israel had died. And he had also just lost a lot of seats in congress to the Republican Party.

And then he had a political comeback which could have created some arrogance and all this helped pull Clinton towards Monica and towards his involvement with her.

So you want to take all these issues into account as you think, "All right, what's the meaning of the affair and how am I going to talk to the couple about the affair?"

And now we want to go through some of the treatment issues when you are handling an affair. It's helpful for me to think about it as an initial stage, a middle stage and an ending stage. Although sometimes the initial stage can go very quickly and sometimes you don't get all the way to the termination stage because the couple decides not to come back.

Peter: So Ellyn, let me ask you a commonly debated question within the field. When a couple comes in and one person says the affair hasn't ended, do you make that person stop seeing the affair partner before working with them as a couple?

Do you make that a condition of working with them as a couple or do you just let things unfold the way they are going to unfold?

Ellyn: I don't make that a condition. And I know that's a different position from a lot of therapists in the field.

However, I do make a condition of honesty. So if the person is having the affair

and wanting to continue to have secrets and slip and slide around the primary spouse then I don't want to work with them as a couple.

Peter: The other thing too is if you say to the person you have to stop the affair before we can work together as a couple there is nothing really to keep that person from lying to you, the therapist. If they are going to lie to their spouse, they will lie to you as a therapist and you really can't enforce the no contact with the other person if you are going to work with them as a couple.

So, trying to get that kind of promise is a little bit like saying to an alcoholic, you've got to stop drinking before I will work with you in treatment.

Ellyn: Before we launch into the different stages of handling an affair it might be kind of fun to just think for a minute about all the different emotions that can propel somebody towards an affair. I am going to ask Zoe to open up the line and say what comes to your mind in terms of feelings that propel people into an affair. Just go ahead, yell it out.

Female Speaker: *Anger.*

Female Speaker: *Loneliness*

Male Speaker: *Insecurity.*

Female Speaker: *Adequacy.*

Female Speaker: *Out of control.*

Male Speaker: *Grief.*

Female Speaker: *Feeling controlled.*

Ellyn: Okay, thanks.

Peter: So you are beginning to identify all the different kinds of emotions that are important to address when you are working with the couple underneath both sides.

Ellyn: In the initial stage of working with the couple when an affair has been revealed, it often starts out that they come in and it's like a crisis. If it's just been revealed there is often a wounded or very upset party. Everything is up in the air, everybody is upset. You may have somebody even be suicidal.

The first thing that I want to do is slow the process down and slow down the intensity of what's going on and confront the need to make impulsive, premature decisions about the marriage.

The couple wants to know urgently what's going to happen now and they want to just figure it out immediately.

Peter: What do I do about it? What do I do about it? What do I about it is the common lament said with a lot of intensity.

Ellyn: And also they often have distorted ideas about what led to the affair. So, I want to ask them if they can go slowly enough to understand the meaning of the affair, to understand what it had to do with either each of them as individuals or about the marriage so that they can make a truly informed decision about whether they want to stay or leave rather than reacting impulsively.

Peter: Now here is the thing behind the impulsive decision. It comes from the latest brain research that the part of our brain that feels physical pain is the same part of our brain that lights up when we feel emotional pain and

Ellyn: And rejection.

Peter: -- and rejection. There is a lot of emotional pain and the urgency to make a decision is basically being driven by a desire to get relief from the pain.

That's what they are seeking and so it's not giving them good news by saying it's important to slow down so that we can understand it because what they want to do is get relief from the pain as soon as possible.

Ellyn: So, as part of handling that immediate threat there will be a need to clarify what will happen right now. They will be asking you to help them with, is the affair over or isn't it? Are they going to live together or are they going to separate?

Part of that initial stage is clarifying some of those kinds of decisions and actively controlling the communication in the office so that they don't escalate and so that you can help them make a thoughtful decision about whether they can stay in the same house or not. And if there are children involved, how to tell the children.

As part of that initial beginning I want to be able to define some of the individual issues that contributed to the affair and particularly the developmental arrest in the couple that probably led to the affair because in doing that, then I can help them take a look at this is what the nuts and bolts of therapy are going to be about.

I also as part of the initial stage want to clarify a confidentiality agreement. After a lot of soul searching what I have decided to do is that I give the couple the choice because, I do frequently have some individual sessions as in the context of couple therapy.

I don't do long term ongoing individual therapy with any partner, but I like to know what's going on. I like to have the truth and the information and so, I give the couple the choice: do the two of you want to have the ability to keep things in confidence when I see you separately, or is everything available to be communicated when we are back together again?

Just having them wrestle with the issue of confidentiality can be extremely

revealing and in fact can determine whether or not they choose to continue in treatment.

Peter: It really takes you out of making that decision for them. They have to wrestle with that conundrum on their own. Do you help them work through that solution in the office?

Ellyn: Sure. I mean, I would help them come to terms with it and make a decision and that's even part of some beginning differentiation work if they are in different places about it.

I also was supervising a case not too long ago where I thought the female partner in the couple where there was an affair did a very interesting thing as part of the initial stage of treatment.

Her husband had lied to her twice about involvement with the same woman and he really, really wanted his wife to be in therapy with him. He wanted to rebuild the marriage, he said. She felt extremely untrusting and he was very, very adamant and crying and saying, "I want to be with you, I want you to take this risk and come to therapy and let's work it out."

So she said to him, "You are asking me to take a big risk and in fact at the moment, I don't think you are such a good risk. So I am going to ask you to risk also."

She said, "What I would like to do is have you and I sign an agreement that we will be in therapy as long as it takes to rebuild our marriage. But if I find out in the course of our therapy that you have met with her, gone out with her, seen her again, then we will have an agreement that our financial settlement will be 60-40. You will get 40% of our finances and I will get 60%. On those terms I will participate in the therapy and otherwise I won't."

It was an interesting way for her to approach the risk issue. It also did what she thought he might do which was that he said, "If that's the case and that's the way you want to do it, I realize that I am going to go off with the other woman and I don't really want the marriage." So he brought that to light very quickly.

Let's move on to the middle stage of therapy. In the middle stage of therapy, you really are focusing on each of the individual issues and helping partners see what they have projected onto one another that may have led to a significant contribution to the affair.

You are looking at particular transferences that they may have to each other. I saw a new couple recently for example, where she was the one who had an affair and her husband kept saying, "But she's so strong, she's so strong, she is so much stronger than me. I am the one who's vulnerable."

In fact she was quite vulnerable. She had had several deaths in her family in the last two years before this. She was actually a woman who was afraid to

acknowledge her dependence on him and yet she wanted to be nurtured and wanted a lot of emotional sustenance and he couldn't see that at all.

Peter: Let me just make a comment about the transition from the first stage of therapy as it moves into more individual work. One of the common dilemmas that therapists have is sitting in the office while the spouse is just railing and beating on the person who had the affair. And the person who had the affair just sits there and basically at least at first, believes they should take it, be a good sport, as if this is a part of the atonement for it.

What I do is, I talk to the couple about anger. I say anger really is a feeling that results from an injury or mistreatment. And anger usually shows itself in a desire to hit out at somebody or something else. And underneath that anger there is always distress or sorrow.

The other aspect of anger that I will tell couples is that, it's also a medical term which is used to describe an inflamed sore or wound. And the desire to hit out is a natural reflex under anger, but I will tell the couple there is a difference between anger and rage.

Rage is a really deep indignation about righting a wrong, but it gets expressed as a desire to punish the other person. A lot of times what goes on in the office is a lot of rage and what the spouse does is want to inflict damage on the other person for the amount of pain that they have felt. When that rage continues they are basically traumatizing the partner and now they've got two problems.

Each is being traumatized by the other person. So it's not just let it all hang out. It will help to start making the distinction between rage and anger– the desire for revenge and punishment versus expressing the pain that's underneath the anger.

Ellyn: Long ago I heard a panel of a number of experts in the field and the focus of the panel was, "What do you believe made a difference with couples who successfully worked through and resolved an affair?"

What the panel seemed to agree on was that one of the deciding differences was that there was in fact the capacity for the hurt partner to be able to express some of their hurt and anger, but to do it in short time specific chunks. And there were clearly defined boundaries around the time and space for that with the other person listening.

This is part of the middle stage of treatment. For those of you who are familiar with our work using the Initiator-Inquirer process, this is a really crucial place to be able to use that.

One of the core ideas in the Initiator-Inquirer is that you really take turns and that the initiator in fact does have the opportunity to at times regress and express what either they are wanting to know or what they are feeling. And the other person, with the help of the therapist, is able to respond in a compassionate empathic way.

And in fact those people do have significant issues when an affair has traumatized the couple. They do need time and the safety of the therapy space to be able to bring those out into the open and work them through.

Peter: It's beginning to re-create safety within that bubble and boundary again.

Ellyn: And in fact I would like to talk about the issue of obsessing about affairs and the details. Particularly I am talking about the process of obsessing and wanting to know and asking a lot of questions and then not letting it go.

There are some aspects of that that are extremely valuable if it's done well, and there are some destructive elements about it as well.

The value of it is that if a partner is able to ask questions and get some answers, it re-establishes the broken boundary around the primary couple, and it will put an end to the deception and the feeling of craziness. What it does is, it shifts the secrecy from the affair partner back to the spouse, where the spouse is now the one who knows what went on.

It's also an opportunity to stop projection and blown up distortions. So for example, often people want to know were they good looking? Was the sex fantastic? And they can find out sometimes that no, in fact, the sex was not all that fantastic or it wasn't what had been imagined.

It also helps them create a meaning together, a shared meaning of what it was that enabled the affair to take place in the context of their marriage.

Peter: Let me add a PS about the obsessing, which is, I will go back to the analogy again of a start up company, where if a start up company is having a lot of problems, it makes good sense for somebody to spend a lot of time thinking how are we going to meet the payroll? How are we going to increase sales? What are we going to do about our marketing?

It's almost impossible for a person to be confronted with a significant challenge and not reflect on it in terms of what it means, what can be done about it, what are the real problems. So I try to reassure the obsessing partner that they are not crazy for having these thoughts that are so intrusive and obsessive.

I reassure the partner who had the affair that this is just a natural process when you are faced with a crisis that you just think a lot about it, what is the meaning of what's going on and what happened.

Ellyn: Often by going through that process the one who had the affair begins to really understand that it was not a personal injury or a personal insult. I mean, sometimes it is because it was meant for revenge, but many more times it was not personal and it's much more reflection of the inability in the couple to be honest, to be overt, to be direct with each other. It gives them a way of working through.

Peter: And you really aren't responsible if your partner embezzles. It's their ethics, their morality, their behavioral decisions. It's how they respond under pressure.

Ellyn: Now, let's look at what obsessing about the affair and the details about it does not accomplish. If somebody is just fixed on that type of obsession, it may keep them very distant from their own issues.

It may keep them from looking at the fact that they may be what we call a "Lie Invitee." We have written a lot about that in the book, *"Tell Me No Lies."*

The "Lie Invitee" is the partner who can't handle anything direct and in fact clobbers the partner when they are direct. Sometimes the obsessing partner would like to continue that pattern which makes it impossible for the other person to be straight with them.

Peter: When the person who has the affair begins to get more vulnerable about what's going on, why they had the affair etc, and then they get verbally or emotionally smacked by the spouse who didn't like the answer. Or the answer might create the potential for more intimacy than they are able to handle.

Ellyn: The obsessing may support a kind of self righteousness and a continual focusing on the other rather than the self. It may keep a persecutor victim dynamic going on.

I want to mention also the issue about what information somebody who is looking for facts or information deserves. Obviously, if you get into too many details about all the aspects of the sex, that can be even more traumatic.

But I think it is legitimate when a couple is putting the boundary back around the two of them to know who the affair was with, the extent of emotional involvement, whether or not all contact has ceased including cyberspace, and the extent of the sex – how frequent, not the actual aspects of it. How often did it happen, was it protected or unprotected sex, and how much deception was used to arrange the meetings?

I think they also want to know who else knows about it and why the desire for this affair existed. And this information helps a partner decide, do I want to grieve the marriage and get a divorce or am I really grieving the loss of symbiosis and the loss of perfection and idealization that I had?

Or maybe I lost the sense that I could put unbounded trust in somebody else and not realize what might happen. The information may help me to challenge myself and to develop and grow and work on my own ambivalence about going or staying and may help me answer the question, "Can I stay with integrity?"

Peter: Working with couples where there has been an affair really involves a whole pyramid of skills, developmental processes, developmental attitudes and it's not something that can be just solved as a problem. I tell couples this is why we can't solve that all at once or with one solution.

Ellyn: I thought I would share one thing, this is a little bit of a tangent. When my daughter was 11 years old, in school she was given an assignment where everybody got a feeling and they had to write their own definition of that feeling

word. She happened to get the word 'jealously' and she wrote what I thought that was a fabulous definition of jealousy and it's one that I use with couples often in an affair situation.

She said, "Jealousy is when someone gets something that you want, you act like you want to get back at them, or you act angry around that person. Sometimes it can be solved, sometimes it can't. But when you are jealous you usually aren't capable of other good feelings. You spend your time and energy trying to get back or trying to forget about what just happened. Now that's jealousy." And I thought that was really good the way she put it.

Let's talk a minute now about the termination stage.

Peter: Let me describe one intervention that I use either at the beginning or middle phase of treatment. It's an intervention that I have found exceedingly useful not just for couples where there has been an affair, but for a lot of couples in general.

I will ask them to start describing the kind of relationship that they want to create or be in. What does this really look like?

The second part is, what kind of partner do you need to be or to become in order to bring that relationship about? The real work, the toughest work, is lining up our integrity to be the partner we need to become to bring about the relationship we want.

The reality is, most couples will spend more time trying to figure what movie to go to, or what restaurant to go to than trying to figure out just what kind of partner do I need to become.

We get medium clarity about how we want our partner to be when times are tough or in a difficult discussion. We rarely spend time trying to understand the kind of partner that we need to be in order to bring this relationship about, especially under high stress, during fights or arguments.

Couples will often start by answering the question about the relationship they want to be in by saying, "Well I want one that's happy or loving."

That's like saying to a travel agent, "Well I want to go on a vacation that makes me feel good or relaxed or re-energized." And if you are just willing to give a blank check to the travel agent and let him push whatever he happens to be promoting at the moment, good luck.

Ellyn: A man said to me at the end of therapy, "The most important thing that you said to me in the course of our work together was that I wasn't going to be able to evaluate and make a decision about the future based on the past. But I was going to be able to evaluate it by how much I could trust both me and her to bring up issues and by the persistence we each showed in resolving them. And that in that way I would be able to come to my own determination by how much risk each of us were willing to take."

And that leads us into the termination stage which is the time when the couple really can make a much better decision about whether to stay together or separate.

It's at this stage that new agreements are negotiated and they can renegotiate a monogamy commitment or an honesty commitment.

It's also at this stage that I think both forgiveness and apology often take place. Forgiveness meaning, not that it won't be a painful piece of the couple's past, but that they really have moved beyond any vengeance and any bitter rage or thoughts of getting back at or getting even. It doesn't mean forgetting.

An apology that is heartfelt on each side, an apology that really addresses the embezzlement, will address the reality of what went wrong.

When I was finishing with one couple they kept saying to me, "There is something missing. I am not sure what it is but I don't feel quite finished."

And she came into a session and she said, "I know what's not finished. I haven't really said to you that I don't like myself, the part of me that was so dishonest with you that hid so much and snuck around. I have never said to you that that's not congruent with the kind of person or partner I want to be. And I think that you need to know that I don't respect myself for that, and it's been hard for me to look at myself and say that to you."

Peter: Let me just add a PS to that. If you don't utilize EMDR or some of the other energy psychology approaches, emotional freedom techniques, "be set free fast" with Larry Nims, those are really good to help people overcome earlier trauma.

Ellyn: Two last things as we get close to wrapping up.

If you sit down and you are evaluating one of your own cases, you can ask yourself these questions about each partner:

What's the current behavior?

What are the feelings that are being activated?

What is the developmental stage and what is the primary intrapsychic component?

If you can answer these questions on each partner, it will make you enormously more centered in terms of your own interventions and the mirror that you keep holding up to them about what they need to work through and about the shifts that are going to have to happen if they are going to be able to put it back together.

I also wanted to mention two references. Janis Spring's book "*After the Affair*" is a wonderful book for partners to understand better the process that's involved in working through.

And I also think that our book "*Tell Me No Lies*" is good because what we do in that book is we follow two couples: one who develops a very effective process of differentiation and we describe what that looks like and another couple who had repeated examples of failed differentiation which finally resulted in the break up of the marriage through a combination of some affairs and a mistress.

Peter: There is one more resource which is on our website. If you go to www.couplesinstitute.com, there where it says, resources for therapist on a splash page, there is a document in there about how to get the most out of couple's therapy. It's a really good document to help couples think about relationships and help them to focus and get more organized around important things to look at instead of finger pointing when they come into therapy. So it's a good thing to give to your couples if you want another resource that's free that you can give them.

Zoe: Let me interject something about that. Sometimes people have trouble finding that on our website. If you are looking for that article, you follow the arrow to the therapists' side. It seems like it would be on the couples' side of the site since it's written for couples. But it's on the therapists' side of the site under "articles."

Peter: You can also ask your couples to go to the website because we write a monthly newsletter for couples, and they can read the articles online or subscribe to the newsletter. I write articles on passive aggressive behavior, what it means to live with integrity in a relationship, etc.

Ellyn: Zoe, I would love for you to open it up just to get very fast one or two people's feedback how the call has been for them.

Female Speaker: *Fabulous.*

Female Speaker: *Fabulous.*

Female Speaker: *Great.*

Female Speaker: *Very helpful.*

Female Speaker: *Really packed and powerful.*

Female Speaker: *Good information.*

Female Speaker: *Maybe we need part two.*

Ellyn: One of the things we are thinking about is possibly doing a Q&A kind of call in a few weeks where we go deeper into some of these issues, but this way we have all got a broad brush on some of the ways that we think about affairs.

Peter: And you get oriented with concepts and principles about how to deal with this hugely complex problem of affairs.

And I'm sorry we couldn't answer specific questions tonight, but we decided to do the principles instead.

Zoe: Pete and Ellyn, would it be appropriate to invite people to email questions to us? Not that we can answer them all but it would give us an idea of what some helpful future topics might be.

Ellyn: Sure. It would be great if you all would, anybody of you would like us to do a Q&A or go more in depth send us questions.

Zoe: So you can email to admin@couplesinstitute.com. And definitely for more resources to improve your work with couples whether it's related to affairs or some other aspect of couple's therapy, please visit our website. That's www.couplesinstitute.com.

Ellyn: And thank you all so much for being with us.

Peter: Yeah, thanks a lot. This has been a grand experiment. Ellyn and I love trying new things. I'm glad that you guys are willing to try new things and so we appreciate your feedback and support thank you lot.

Peter: Good night.

Ellyn: Good night.