

Why People Cheat

by Dan Harvey

Scientists and mental health experts indicate the reasons can be psychological as well as genetic.



Odds against marital fidelity are daunting. In fact, it's a crapshoot, if results from a recent study conducted at the University of Montreal are any indication. Lead researcher Genevieve Beaulieu-Pelletier, a university doctoral student, found that partners cheat with alarming frequency: between 40 to 76 percent, and this goes for men *and* women.

Other research also suggests that romantics play against a stacked deck. Scientists at the Kirovsk Institutet in Sweden report that some males are even genetically disposed to cheat. Their research uncovered a so-called "monogamy gene," or more specifically, a gene variant designated allele-334. "Anti-monogamy" might be a more apt term, as men possessing this variant are twice as likely to engage in behavior that creates strife in their marriage.

So, is marital infidelity as inevitable as blonde hair and blue eyes? Should women require prospective mates to undergo premarital screening?

That seems a rather drastic measure. Cheating actually appears driven by emotional bonding capabilities (or lack thereof). Behavioral geneticist Hasse Walum, the Swedish study's lead researcher, remarked that genetics is neither destiny nor an excuse for bad behavior. Essentially, genes don't dictate what will happen. Rather, they're an indicator of what could happen, and triggers seem to be environment and upbringing.

Similarly, during her research, Beaulieu-Pelletier observed that emotional attachments developed in adulthood are strongly influenced by childhood experience, particularly in a so-called avoidant-attachment household, where parents were frugal with affection.

Don't Blame Me—I was Raised that Way

Mental health care professionals who have worked in the trenches in clinical experience provide a more comprehensive perspective on why people cheat. For example, psychotherapist Toni Coleman, LCSW, CMC, does believe that some people are more biologically predisposed toward infidelity, but she adds that socialization is a more important factor. "Childhood experiences have greater impact than genetics," she says.

Psychologist, social worker and author LeslieBeth Wish, EdD, emphasizes the avoidance-attachment factor. "It represents a buffer against intimacy," she says. "People who have difficulty achieving closeness unconsciously sabotage their own efforts and one of the most common ways is by entering into an extra-marital affair."

