# HAVING AFFAIRS

**Selections from Chapter Four of**
***The Ethical Lives of Clients - Transcending Self-Interest in Psychotherapy***
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Affairs come in many forms and have many meanings for the person having the affair and for the couple. There is extensive clinical literature on couples recovering from affairs but little on how to work with clients who are currently having an affair or who are processing a past affair. Not wanting to come across as judgmental, many therapists stay away from the ethical domain of affairs, even though for clients it's often a central factor in their processing of the affair. (We are talking here about secret, non-consensual affairs, not polyamory.)

There are usually multiple ethical issues involved in affairs: sexual actions, lying/deception, putting a partner at risk of an STD, as well as ethical dimensions involving children via putting the stability of their family at risk if their parents' relationship ends via the affair.

## STRATEGIES FOR ETHICAL CONSULTATION ABOUT AFFAIRS

I will outline the approach in terms of the L.E.A.P-C skills.

### LISTEN

The key here is to listen for whether the client expresses guilt or remorse for the affair in terms of their own value system and the effects of the affair on the spouse and others. It's also important to hear when the client expresses no spontaneous remorse, but instead stays with complaints about the marriage. Since guilt is often intertwined with resentment towards the person we feel guilty about, sometimes all that comes out at first is the resentment ("having no sex drove me to do this"), with guilt coming out later in the conversation.

### EXPLORE

When the client spontaneously expresses guilt or remorse about the affair, then you can explore the meaning and other emotions involved. Be willing to stay with the guilt as opposed to just noting it, normalizing it, and then immediately moving on to more comfortable therapeutic terrain. When the client's ethical

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concerns are fully part of the conversation, you can go back and forth between the meaning making about the affair and the ethical consequences.

If a client has not expressed regrets or concerns about the consequences of the affair for the partner, then you can ask questions to elicit that concern. I sometimes start with an empathic connection and then ask an ethical question: *"I hear you on how unloved and frustrated you've been in your marriage, and that led you to have an affair. I also want to ask you whether having an affair is consistent with your values and how you see yourself."*

## AFFIRM

Many clients say that cheating on their spouse is compromising their values, that it's not who they are or want to be in their core. I affirm the client's sense of disjuncture between how they are living and how they believe they ought to be living. Even if they client does not indicate a self-compromise, I can affirm that they are here in therapy struggling with how to move forward.

## PERSPECTIVE

Clients having affairs are often in need of ethical as well as clinical perspectives from their therapist, partly because affairs can be so emotionally powerful that balanced personal perspective is hard to come by. The rhythm of the ethical consultation is to go back and forth between the client's emotions and meaning making about the affair, including what the affair is doing for them in a positive way, and the consideration of the effects on others.

As example of a perspective statement is to note that for many spouses the degree of deception during an affair is as emotionally damaging as the sexual part; it makes them doubt the reality of the world they have lived in for some time. Another example is to note that experts in the field are pessimistic about the long-term viability of romantic relationships that begin in extramarital affairs, which raises the question of whether it's worth the damage to the spouse and the marriage for a relationship that may not last. A final example is about where the responsibility lies for an affair: I have found that the following clarity on my end helps clients understand their agency and responsibility in a confusing situation: both spouses share some responsibility for the chronic problems in a marriage, but the spouse who chooses the path of an affair is individually responsible for that action.

## CHALLENGE

The criteria for using ethical challenge are: when the client has big blind spot, is not seeing the immediate harm to someone, or is acting in a way inconsistent with their

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own values—and is not responsive to the L.E.A.P skills and interventions. When delivering a challenge, I often begin by framing it in terms of worry for the client. In this case: *"Susan, I'm worried for you right now. You've said that this affair is doomed because you don't really respect the guy, and there is a crisis coming if and when your husband finds out on his own. It feels like you are playing with fire here."*

A similar challenge technique is to invite the client to imagine a future self who is looking back at the current self and the situation. *"What would your future self say was the right thing to do?"* (Notice the use of the explicit ethical term "the right thing.")

It's important to end a challenge with a reaffirmation of the client's autonomy in making their own decisions. I sometimes say it this way: *"I appreciate how you have taken a hard look at what's going on for you right now, and that you've let me push you a bit. However you decide to move forward, I'll be here for you."*

References:

Doherty, W. J. (2022). *The ethical lives of clients: Transcending self-interest in psychotherapy.* American Psychological Association.

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