

Ep #127: The Limits of Other People's Advice



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With Your Host

Dr. Marie Murphy

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Hi everyone, I'm Dr. Marie Murphy. I am a relationship coach and I help people who are engaging in anything they think counts as infidelity to deal with their feelings, clarify what they want, and make decisions about what they're going to do. No shame, no blame, no judgments. If you are ready to begin the process of resolving your infidelity situation in a way that's truly right for you, I can help you do it. When you're ready to talk, you can schedule an introductory coaching session with me through my website, mariemurphyphd.com. I offer confidential, compassionate coaching via Zoom, so we can work together no matter where you're located. I can't wait to meet you.

Today we are going to talk about advice, and, as the title of this episode indicates, the limits of seeking and receiving advice when it comes to our infidelity situation. I just did a little Googling and I found a number of definitions of "advice" from fairly reputable online dictionaries, and I consider the differences in the definitions I found pretty meaningful. The definition from the Cambridge Dictionary is the one I consider most applicable to today's discussion, and here it is: "Advice is an opinion that someone offers you about what you should do, or how you should act in a particular situation." When I'm talking about advice in the context of infidelity situations, that's what I'm talking about. Here's the definition again: advice is an opinion that someone offers you about what you should do, or how you should act in a particular situation.

There are times in life when seeking out advice makes a lot of sense, in

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my opinion. Let's say we want to buy a new car, and we know we want an electric car, but we don't know which one. We have a pretty clearly defined need, and a clear sense of how we want to meet that need, and from there, someone else who has deep knowledge of electric cars might, upon hearing about what we want, give us their opinion about which car we should choose that we end up really liking.

When we have a need, or a want, that is pretty clearly defined, other people's advice may help us meet those needs very effectively. And when that happens, that's great. But it is important to point out that even if we receive advice that we think is good, we are still in charge of creating the life experiences that we want to have. So for instance, if we tell someone we want to buy an electric car, and they tell us to buy a Tesla, and we do, and we don't like it, dealing with that is our responsibility. The advice-giver never has the responsibility or the power to act on the advice given, or to live with the consequences of the advice taken.

But even so, some of us love to seek out advice, follow that advice, and then blame the advice-giver if we don't like what comes out of taking their advice. Complaining about getting "bad advice" might be temporarily satisfying, but it probably doesn't get you what you really want in the long term. So no matter what, if we seek out advice, how we make use of it is always our responsibility. We're the only ones who live with the consequences of acting on someone else's advice, and we need to take ownership of that.

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That might sound like a dire warning, but it really isn't. Sometimes seeking out advice, and making use of it can be great. Having experts tell us what they think we should do can save us a lot of time and energy and hassle, and if we willingly take responsibility for acting on advice received, we may benefit greatly from advice.

But when it comes to areas of our lives that are less straightforward than selecting a new car – like infidelity situations, for instance – seeking out other people's advice may not help us as much as we think it will, or as much as we want it to.

Before I tell you why that is the case, let me illustrate why seeking out advice often seems like such a great idea.

Here's what sometimes happens with advice and infidelity situations. The exact details of the infidelity situation itself don't really matter. What matters is the person who's in the situation thinks they're confused, or thinks they don't know what to do, or thinks they don't know what they want, or all of those things, or something along those lines. And maybe they've been "trying to figure it out" for quite some time, and they haven't really gotten anywhere, and they feel frustrated. Now I say "trying to figure it out" in quotes because sometimes what people are doing when they're "trying to figure out" their infidelity situation is essentially spinning their wheels. And when we don't know any better, this is just what we do. If we don't know how to get ourselves out of unhelpful patterns of

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thinking, we may not get ourselves out of our unhelpful patterns of thinking! It's not a character flaw, it's just a lack of certain skills... or perhaps a lack of utilization of certain skills.

Anyway, the poor person in question has been spinning their wheels for a while, and they are TIRED OF IT. And understandably so! And they've come to the conclusion that they really "can't" figure out what to do about their situation on their own. They've tried, it hasn't worked, so they figure they need someone else to tell them what they should do. And in a way, this seems totally logical! If we can't figure something out, we should just go ask someone else, right? There are so many experts out there in the world, surely someone can tell us how to live our lives in a way that we'll feel great about, right?

Well, sometimes. Sometimes other people tell us what we should do and it totally resonates with us and we take their advice and make use of it, and we really like the outcomes of doing this. That can absolutely happen. Sometimes a bit of useful insight is all we need to help ourselves move forward in a way that we feel great about. But it's important to recognize that when this happens, we have decided that we like someone's advice, we have decided to make use of it, and we have decided to like the consequences of making the decisions that we did. We may not have made these decisions consciously or deliberately! But we did effectively make these choices. So it's not that the advice gets all the credit. It's what we decided to do with it, and it's what we think about the results of whatever we did with it. THAT'S what matters.

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But a lot of times, we don't think that advice works this way. Quite often, we really do think that someone else has the answers to what we should do about our infidelity situation, and as soon as we hear the "right" advice, we'll just know it, and THEN we'll be able to proceed and do something other than spinning our wheels, and THEN everything will be easier and simpler and a lot less uncomfortable.

And I think we can all be forgiven for thinking this way because we are told, in many ways, implicitly and explicitly, that there are "right" ways to live your life or "healthy" ways to live your life or "good" ways to live your life, and that other people know exactly what living in those ways looks like, and we don't. The notion that there are definite answers for what these things look like, and that we can find them if we search long and hard enough, is definitely out there. So we tend to look for answers "out there." We tend to want other people's advice because we think it's where certainty comes from. We tend to believe that other people might have a better sense of what's right for us than we do.

But are other people's opinions about what we should do a reliable source of clarity or certainty? And do other people have a better sense of what we want, or what's right for us than we do? You can come up with your own answers to these questions, and I'll respect them no matter what they are. But I can tell you that although we may really, really want to have certainty and clarity handed to us on a silver platter, we may have to develop these things for ourselves.

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And quite simply that is because resolving life's bigger questions may not be a paint by number affair. There may be many situations in life when other people really cannot speak to OUR version of an experience, even if they have experienced something similar themselves. And that's because our desires are unique. Our priorities are unique. Our values are unique. Our sense of what is MOST important to us in life is unique. We are unique! Or put in very general terms, the way we think about our lives and our situations is unique to us, so even if someone else has experienced something very similar to what we're going through, we might not want to think about our situation in the way they thought about theirs. We may not want to live life the way someone else in particular has. We may not want to live our lives in the way ANYONE ELSE ever has!

And this is why it is often so much more productive to invest in the PROCESS of deciding what we want rather than investing in looking for someone to give us an opinion about what we should do. Because remember, even if you get an opinion from someone that you really like, you're still going to have to go through the process of deciding why you like their advice, and deciding to act on it, and dealing with all of the emotions that come up as you do so, and then seeing your decision through, and committing to loving the after-effects of your decision. Even if you get advice that you really like, nobody can do that part for you.

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And in a lot of situations in life – including but not limited to situations involving infidelity – our best course of action may be to deliberately evaluate our situation, and actively decide what we want to do about it. This may not be something that we know how to do, or we might think this is something that we don't know how to do, but we can learn how to do it. And that is part of what I teach my clients. There are some situations in life where we either can't find any relevant or useful advice about what we should do, or we find some advice, but it just doesn't take us very far.

The thing is, we often don't think that we can “just decide” what we want, and what we want to do about a situation. We don't think it could be that simple. We think that we need a message, or a sign, or some kind of affirmation that we want what we want. Or perhaps, we think we need some sort of indication that what we want is what we “truly” want, and the decisions we're making are the “right” ones. We think that certainty and clarity are these elusive things, and we mystify the process of coming to certainty. Sometimes we believe that certainty is something that essentially falls out of the sky and hits us on the head, or, perhaps, comes to us through advice that someone else gives us. We want a moment of insight that feels really good, or we want a revelation to hit us with unmistakable clarity, and we think that if we get that, everything will be better.

But to echo something I've already said, even if you get a piece of advice that seems really great to you, even if you get that hit of insight

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that rings true for you, even if someone tells you what you should do and you believe that they're right, there's a big difference between passively receiving advice, and actively deciding to act on it, and then actually doing so.

This is why it is so important and so rewarding to invest our time and energy into learning how to generate our own answers to vexing life questions. To be clear, the work of creating clarity for ourselves when we're in the midst of a situation that seems confusing or challenging or maybe even IMPOSSIBLE to resolve can take some serious effort. Learning how to clarify what we want and take responsibility for our preferences and make decisions with self-generated conviction can be a new thing for us, and just like any learning process, this one requires us to try out non-habitual ways of thinking and doing things. And doing non-habitual things usually takes effort. And not only that, it may require SUSTAINED effort. We may not get any instant gratification! As such we may resist the effort associated with cultivating clarity for ourselves, and instead, use that effort to go on the perpetual hunt for advice. And we may get a lot more instant gratification doing that!

And that brings me to a very important point, which is that it's so easy to use advice-seeking or advice-receiving as a form of distraction. Finding someone to give us an opinion of theirs about what we should do can seem like such a great use of our time. After all, there are so many wise people out there. Surely someone has faced a situation like ours before, or is an expert who deals with people in situations like ours all

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the time, and they can tell us what we need to do to move forward that we like! It may seem like this should be the case, and thus, going on a never-ending quest for other people's opinions can seem like it's going to be really productive and worthwhile.

Because after all, there's a vague but powerful idea out there that when we have questions, the answers are "out there" somewhere – rather than within us. Someone ELSE knows what we should do. If we ask enough people, or read enough articles, we'll hit upon the golden nugget of information that will make it all seem clear. And when we believe these kinds of things, we may send ourselves on an endless quest, and the process of looking for the right advice can be very addictive.

Addictive is kind of a loaded term. Put differently, the search for answers can be a very compelling hunt that can take up a lot of our time, and may not lead us anywhere all that great. Sometimes I talk to clients who tell me they have been obsessively Googling, and reading all kinds of stuff about what they should do about their infidelity situation. And when I ask them how that's going for them, they almost always say, "It totally sucks. Everything I read makes me feel terrible, but I just can't stop looking."

Although my primary role is not to give advice, but rather, to help you find your own answers, I DO give advice in these situations, and that advice is, stop Googling. Sometimes I yell at people and say, stop fucking Googling. If you've been obsessively reading everything you can about what you should do about your infidelity situation and that's

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HELPING you, fine! That's great. But if it isn't helping you, I suggest it's time to stop doing that and try a different approach. Or put differently, just stop fucking Googling what to do about your situation. Stop it.

Another thing about advice is that it can be really fun to seek out advice and have people who are willing to give it to us focusing on us and our lives and our challenges or our predicaments. It can be really NICE to get that kind of attention. We may really LIKE having someone get so interested in "helping" us. Sometimes we LOVE to be the person who has the life drama going on that all of our friends take an active interest in. We may feel special or important when other people want to tell us what they think we should do.

This can be a really potent form of validation and entertainment for both the advice giver and the advice receiver. Both parties may get to feel important and special. Each party may get the full attention of the other. It can be so captivating to feel like you're solving an important problem for someone. It can be exciting to feel like the two of you have a secret, or maybe just have the opportunity to talk about a very important business that you don't talk about with many other people. That goes for both advice givers and receivers. And it can be a really intoxicating bonding experience to confide in someone and be confided in, and to give and receive advice.

And if you're in the habit of doing this - and for our purposes, I especially mean that if you're in the habit of seeking out a lot of advice in regards

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to your infidelity situation – and you like what you're getting out of doing that, by all means, keep doing it!

But be aware that by seeking out advice, what we're doing is taking time away from the process of deliberately evaluating our situation and actively deciding what we want to do about it. Seeking out and receiving advice may be great entertainment, but is it helping you deal with your situation in a way that you like? Ask yourself that question.

Now, this entire episode might sound strange to you if you're thinking, wait a minute, isn't it your job as a coach to give people advice? Isn't that the whole point of what you do? And my answer to that question is that I do give people advice on processes. I do offer people tools and concepts to apply to their infidelity situation so that they can examine it in productive ways, get out of their own muddled thinking, and actually arrive at decisions instead of endlessly considering poorly defined options. I give a LOT of guidance about that. But do I tell people things like, "Yeah, I definitely think you should choose your affair partner over your spouse, that's clearly what's right for you"? No way. That is not my role. Sometimes, not very often, but sometimes, clients will say to me, "Well you're the professional. You should just tell me what to do," but I can't do that because I don't know what you should do. There isn't an absolute answer about what you should do that I'm hiding from you. And why would you want me to tell you what you should do? You're the one who has to live with the results of acting on someone else's advice. Wouldn't you rather have the satisfaction of learning how to answer your

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own questions? I CAN tell how to go about doing that.

Now, I will happily admit that there are times when I just want someone else to tell me what I should do, too. I want someone to give me advice that I love, and I want that to magically fix everything. I KNOW in my bones that this isn't the way it works, but yet I still would LIKE for this to be possible, even though I know this isn't the way it works! So I am totally sympathetic to the desire to have someone just tell us what we should do, because we think that will make everything easier.

But what if answering our big life questions doesn't need to be easy? What if grappling with uncertainty is actually incredibly productive? We want to do it in the right ways, of course, but when done well, contending with uncertainty can be an incredibly rich experience. And what if learning how to create our own certainty is not only the best way to resolve our unique infidelity situations, but also one of the most useful meta-skills we can develop in life?

My position, perhaps obviously, is that it's way better to learn how to develop your own certainty instead of looking for advice. Yeah, developing certainty takes work. Yeah, seeking out advice might be fun and entertaining and validating in the short term. FOR SURE. But if you want is to make clear decisions and act on them so that you can move forward in a clear direction and LIVE YOUR LIFE instead of wallowing in indecision, it might be well worth it to forgo the entertainment and dopamine hits you may get from advice seeking, and

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invest in the unglamorous but very productive work of cultivating clarity and certainty for yourself.

And I can help you do that stuff. So many of us chase advice because we simply do not know how to move from uncertainty to certainty. We may not have ever learned any actual practices or tools from moving from murkiness to clarity. I sure as hell never did. My approach to coaching is informed by many aspects of my educational and professional experiences, not JUST the training I have received to coach people, but I have to give my training as a coach a lot of the credit in this regard. Although there are many approaches to coaching out there, the ones I'm familiar with provide a better set of tools for cultivating certainty, finding our own answers, and making clear decisions than I've ever encountered from any other source.

And yes, that is a plug for coaching in general and my coaching services in particular, but if there were something better out there, I'd be selling that instead. If advice were truly helpful, if it were ever possible for someone to just tell other people what they should do and have that work out great, then I'd be offering that instead of what I do offer. I think it's fair to say that what most of us ultimately want is to resolve our infidelity situations in ways we feel are right for us! Right?! And what I truly want is to help you do that. And if I thought there was a better way to do that than the way I do it now – for example, by dishing out my opinions about what you should do – then I'd be doing it.

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So, if you're ready to begin the process of resolving your infidelity situation in a way that's truly right for you, let's work together. I don't have any magic answers as to what you should do about your situation, but I can help you decide what your answers are! And I can promise you that showing yourself that you can come up with your own answers, and you don't need anybody to tell you what you should do in order to resolve your situation is pretty dang awesome. So often we sell ourselves short by believing we are less powerful than we actually are. And that's no fun at all. Feeling powerless and confused and unable to do anything about that is not a fun state to be in. So if you're ready to learn how to tap into your own wisdom and power, head on over to my website and schedule an introductory coaching session with me today. I'll provide all the guidance. Make no mistake about that. But in the end, you'll be able to take pride in having arrived at your own answers.

When you're ready to talk with me you can schedule that introductory coaching session at mariemurphyphd.com.

Thank you all so much for listening. Have a great week. Bye for now.