

Ep #102: You Got Caught Cheating



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With Your Host

Dr. Marie Murphy

Ep #102: You Got Caught Cheating

Hi everyone, I'm Dr. Marie Murphy. I'm 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're in the midst of a challenging infidelity situation and you would like my help sorting it out, let's work together. You can schedule an introductory coaching session with me through my website, mariemurphyphd.com. I can't wait to meet you.

Today, we are going to talk about getting caught cheating.

Sometimes people get caught cheating and they come to me, and they're like, "Okay, how can I reverse course?", or "How can I undo the damage?" Here's the deal, people, if you get caught, you get caught. If that happens, that is now part of your reality, and wishing it were otherwise isn't going to help you deal with it. Wringing your hands and thinking about what you could or should have done differently to prevent this turn of events from occurring is not going to help you now. I don't know of any ways to change what has happened in the past, so if you want to do that, you may need to listen to somebody else's podcast or something like that. But even though I can't help you change the past, I CAN help you deal with what is actually happening in the present.

I want to underscore that today we're not talking about what to do if you think someone SUSPECTS you of cheating. We're talking about what to do when someone has either caught you in the act of cheating, or

Ep #102: You Got Caught Cheating

presented you with evidence of your cheating that is very hard to plausibly deny.

Even if those are the common threads here, the ways of getting caught or confronted can still vary quite a bit.

Maybe your partner calmly and reasonably confronted you with irrefutable evidence. Or maybe you were naked in a hotel room with your also-naked affair partner when you heard a knock on the door. You tried to ignore it, but the knocking didn't stop, so you threw on some clothes and answered the door, and guess what, it was your spouse. Or maybe someone busted you out. Maybe somebody saw you somewhere, making out with someone who they knew was not your spouse, or the person you're ostensibly committed to, and they took photos of said make out session, and sent them to your spouse, or primary partner. Yikes!

Your level of readiness for a moment like any of these can vary a lot. Maybe you've had the sense that your spouse or your partner had some suspicions about your behavior, or maybe you thought they had NO IDEA. Maybe you had thought about getting caught, and thought about how you would handle the situation if it were ever to occur. Or maybe you've given this kind of scenario zero thought at all, and feel completely unprepared to handle it.

Ep #102: You Got Caught Cheating

But no matter how prepared you are or aren't, getting caught cheating, or being confronted by a partner who knows you are cheating, is not an experience many people find fun. Whether it's a dramatic scene or a fairly cool, straightforward delivery of the news of the discovery, most people don't like getting busted. Now, some people do find RELIEF in getting caught, so there can be that. But overall, getting caught can be a pretty unpleasant experience, so today we're going to talk about how to handle it.

There's a lot we could say about getting caught cheating, but here are the three things we're going to focus on today.

Number one – your feelings about what's going on, which may be pretty intense.

Number two – dealing with your partner's response to what's going on, which also may be pretty intense.

Number three – strategy questions, like deciding how much to disclose or how to frame your story, or deciding what you want to do next.

These three aspects of your experience of your situation are distinct but of course related, and we are going to talk about them as such.

Ep #102: You Got Caught Cheating

Being confronted with the news that your partner knows you are cheating, or getting literally caught in some sort of action which makes it abundantly clear what you've been up to can be an intensely fraught moment. Your partner may be quite upset, and you may be quite surprised. And that may be putting it mildly. And what happens quite often when we get caught doing something that we aren't supposed to be doing, is that we don't have any time to really think about what's happening, and our knee-jerk responses to the situation are defensiveness, or shame, or anger, or fear, or a combination of all of those feelings and then some. And we may ACT on those feelings before we even know what has hit us.

If this has already happened to you, I want you to know that this sort of reaction is totally human. However you felt upon getting caught or confronted is totally human. And even if you responded to getting caught in a way that you don't feel great about in retrospect, that's okay too. You are allowed to be human. If you've already gotten caught, and you're beyond the moment of the initial reaction, later points in this episode will be very important to you.

But if you have not yet gotten caught, and you think you might need to consider the possibility that it might happen someday, I want you to be aware that if you're caught or confronted, you may be hit with a surge of very intense feelings before you have any idea what has happened.

Ep #102: You Got Caught Cheating

And if that happens to you, I encourage you to do your best to PAUSE before you do or say ANYTHING. File that away in your memory now, people. If you get caught cheating, see if you can pause before you react. This may not be easy to do in the moment, but is possible! And simply knowing that it is possible AND helpful may be enough to help you do this in the heat of the moment, should you ever find yourself in such a moment.

To expand on what I said earlier, upon getting caught or confronted, you may be suddenly thrust into a vortex of intense emotions. You may be angry about having been busted, and you may feel angry towards whoever busted you, whether that's your partner, or anyone else involved in the sting. You may feel scared about what's going to happen. You may feel ashamed or guilty or embarrassed, and you may blame others for feeling this way. You may feel indignant or frustrated or resentful. Or you may feel tremendous relief. If you've been totally stressed out by what you've been doing, and you just haven't known how to end it, relief could be your dominant emotion upon getting caught.

But if what you're feeling is primarily VERY, VERY BAD, you may be very inclined to try and DO SOMETHING as quickly as possible to relieve yourself of your tremendous discomfort. You may deny, deny, deny, even if you really don't have any plausible deniability at this point. Or you may attempt to placate the person who has caught you – more on that shortly. Or you may throw a fit and rail at the world for putting you in such a tough position in the first place.

Ep #102: You Got Caught Cheating

Here's the thing. If you are caught or confronted, you may not feel at all prepared to deal with what is happening, and that's okay. But it may help you to recognize that you're not prepared to deal with what is happening, instead of trying to figure out what you should do in a second or a minute or an hour, or even in a day or a week. I want to suggest that your job, upon getting caught or confronted, is to slow down, be present with your own emotions, and digest them as best as you can. Yes, you'll have to make decisions and say things and take action, and stuff like that. But your first order of business is to let the emotional intensity of the moment subside.

Now, let's talk about dealing with your partner's reactions to discovering that you have been cheating.

As I have been emphasizing, you are totally allowed to experience whatever emotions you experience upon getting caught cheating. And your partner, or the person who caught you cheating, is allowed to have their emotions too. And they may indeed be experiencing some very intense feelings of their own, and they may be acting on those emotions in a way that could be, shall we say, quite dramatic. They may be yelling or crying or hurling invectives or actual objects at you. And it can be really uncomfortable for you to be on the receiving end of these kinds of behaviors.

People respond to their partner's responses to finding out that they have been cheating in various ways, but there are two common types of responses that I'm going to talk about now.

Ep #102: You Got Caught Cheating

Number one: Believing that because you cheated, and your partner is very upset about this, your partner has carte blanche to do and say anything to you, and expect anything of you. And that you have to comply.

And number two, frantically doing anything to placate your partner, such as making rash promises in an attempt to preserve the relationship.

These kinds of reactions can be related, but I will talk about them in distinct terms. Regarding the first reaction – believing that if you’ve cheated, your partner is well within their rights to ask anything of you, or do anything to you, I know there’s a lot of messaging out there that says that if you cheated, you have done something very, very wrong, and that it is up to you to atone for your bad behavior immediately and forever. And some people make that if they have been cheated on, they have every right to wake their partner up at three in the morning to tell them what a terrible person they are. Some people make that mean that if they’ve been cheated on, they have a right to know every single thing that happened between you, their cheating partner, and whoever you were cheating with. Some people think that if they have been cheated on, they have every right to demand access to every single one of their cheating partner’s devices, email accounts, passwords to everything, etc.

Now, I know these kinds ideas are out there, and I know a lot of people agree with them, and I know a lot of people who consider themselves experts have sold plenty of books telling you that this is literally or

Ep #102: You Got Caught Cheating

figuratively the word of god, or the WAY IT OBVIOUSLY IS, or the way it absolutely should be.

And you know what I say to that? No way. Actually, here's what I really say. All of that is fucking horseshit. Fucking bollocks.

Yes, you are responsible for your actions. If you cheated, you cheated, and your partner has every right to not like that. But does that mean that you don't have any rights? Does having cheated mean that you're a terrible person and it is therefore your duty to tolerate any and every response to your behavior that your partner might have, no matter how prolonged or extreme?

My answer to all of those questions is NO. You have rights, even if you've cheated. Contrary to what some people will state or imply, you still have the right to decide what you're willing to tolerate in your relationship and what you won't. You have the right to set boundaries. If your partner tells you they have a right to wake you up every night if they feel like it and scream at you, you don't have to participate in that. You don't have to agree that you have to tolerate that. If your partner wakes you up to tell you how awful you are, you can tell them calmly and firmly that you're going back to bed. Or you can move into another bedroom. Or you can move out, or you can end the relationship. Or you can agree to talk only if both parties refrain from yelling or throwing things, or whatever. And if you're working with a couple's therapist who does not affirm your right to draw some boundaries, then you have the right to decide you don't want to work with that couple's therapist anymore.

Ep #102: You Got Caught Cheating

Now, let me just be clear that I am not telling you that you should shut down any or every expression of anger or hurt from your partner. You may well want to allow them to express their anger and hurt. You may well WANT to receive some of that, no matter how messy – or HUMAN – their statements and actions may be, even if it is deeply uncomfortable for you to do so. You may feel really badly about you've done, and you may believe that your partner is well within their rights to tell you exactly how upset they are. There can absolutely be a place for this, and there's a lot more I could say about that. But for today's purposes, the point I'm stressing is that just because you've done something that was outside of the bounds of your committed relationship, you do not have to relinquish your rights or your preferences in the service of appeasing your partner, or "doing the right thing" for the relationship.

The idea that a romantic relationship is more important than the individuals within it is pretty prevalent, especially if it's a committed relationship in which the parties involved have made formal promises to each other – like in marriage. And I'm all in favor of valuing your relationship and taking it seriously and sometimes doing things that your partner wants you to do, even if you don't want to do them. But sometimes, we get the idea that we owe our relationship or we owe our partner more than we owe ourselves. And this can get us into a lot of trouble.

Here's an example of what this can look like. Let's say you've cheated, and been found out, and your partner is PISSED and they are letting you know how pissed they are at every possible opportunity. And you're letting them get mad at you, and you're answering their every question, and you're

Ep #102: You Got Caught Cheating

letting them scour your emails and social media stuff, and you're giving them all your passwords, and you're promising to tell them exactly where you are at all times for the rest of your life, and you're telling them how sorry you are whenever they remind you of how badly you fucked up.

Even if you care deeply about your partner, and feel bad that they are very upset, and recognize that your actions are the occasion for them being upset, is this sort of scenario doing anyone any good? Is your partner feeling good? Are you? Is your relationship improving in any way? If your answer to those questions is emphatically yes, then that's great! If what you're doing is working for you, by all means, keep doing it. But what I so often see is that the person who has cheated complies with their partner's demands even though they don't really want to, but because they think they have to. And that's bad enough, but what's more, nothing discernably good comes out of them doing this. Nobody gets more of what they want in the relationship.

Let me make it absolutely clear that I am totally sympathetic to the experience of the person who's been cheated on! COMPLETELY sympathetic. But when I work with people who have been cheated on, which I do, I always ask them what they are getting out of continuing to harsh on their partner who cheated, so to speak. I ask them if continuing to do that is really HELPING them in any way. And the answer to the latter question is often no. When they're feeling awful, directing their hurt and anger towards their partner may help them deflect some of their intensely uncomfortable emotions, but that's about it, and whether or not that's truly a benefit is questionable.

Ep #102: You Got Caught Cheating

I give everyone a lot of leeway when it comes to their initial reactions to surprising and unpleasant news. We're all human. We're all doing the best we can. We're all allowed our freakouts and our meltdowns. So if your partner has an epic freak out upon discovering that you've been cheating, I urge you to muster as much compassion for them as you can.

BUT. After the initial phase of them being upset has passed, is it helping anyone for them to actively resent or berate you, or scrupulously monitor your every move and every keystroke?

Your partner might like to think that this is somehow helpful, but I want to suggest that it actually isn't. What's going to help them is being willing to digest their feelings, and take responsibility for navigating their own discomfort which is something that only they can do. They might not like what you did, and that is fair, but ultimately, they have to take ownership of their experience of the situation if they want to feel better. We love to think that acting out on our anger or blaming someone else for our hurt will make us feel better, but that's not how it works. If only it did! That might be nice, or at least, it might be convenient. But it doesn't work this way.

Now, I want to stress that the point is for YOU to understand these things and take them into account when you choose how YOU want to engage in the relationship. The point is not for you to attempt to convince your partner of any of this, so that you may influence how THEY engage in the relationship. Let them do what they do. Focus on taking responsibility for what you're doing.

Ep #102: You Got Caught Cheating

Very similar in some ways to the approach of taking everything your person does on the chin, and believing that you **MUST** do this, is the approach of making rash promises in an attempt to placate your partner.

A lot of us believe that we can't really be okay unless our partner is okay. And this can sound really benign, or even noble, because we may think that taking care of our partner and attempting to ensure that they're okay is a Good Thing. And while there are certainly elements of this way of thinking that might be nice, it can also get into trouble if we take it too far.

One of the reasons for this is that although you are responsible for your actions, you are not responsible for other people's feelings. Because you can't be. You don't control other people's emotions, for better or for worse. Their emotions are a product of their thinking, and you don't control that. So even when your actions may be the occasion for their thinking, and thus their feelings, you are not **CAUSING** their feelings, per se.

Now it's important for you to know this, because what happens a lot is the person who has been cheated on is really upset, and believes that the cheater has **MADE** them feel the way they feel, and that the only way for them to feel better is for the cheater to do certain things, like re-commit to the relationship and promise to be faithful forever. That's just one example, of course, but it's not uncommon.

Ep #102: You Got Caught Cheating

And you may really want your partner to feel better, so that they aren't so upset or so angry with you, because you think that then you will feel better. So if they ask you to promise right then and there that you want to be with them forever, and you'll never cheat again, you may say YES! If they ask you to call your affair partner and break up with them on speaker phone, you may do it!

In the heat of a very intense and overwhelming moment, wild promises and rash actions may seem like an excellent solution to tame the chaos and reduce your discomfort. Placating your partner by any means necessary may seem like the best possible course of action in the immediate future.

The problem, of course, is that if you make any wild promises or take rash actions, you may later realize that you don't really want to keep the promises you made, or that you don't like the results of actions you took in an attempt to quickly de-fuse the situation. And then that just becomes more relationship stuff that you have to figure out how to deal with later. In other words, in your effort to find a quick fix, you may end up digging yourself into a deeper hole.

So what on earth should you do INSTEAD of making rash promises, or responding to your partner's every demand if they confront you about cheating or catch you cheating and they are very upset with you and letting you know that in no uncertain terms?

Ep #102: You Got Caught Cheating

Here is what I suggest:

You have to become the dominant parrot. Yes, you heard that right. When you become the dominant parrot, you can create the opportunity to decide what you really want to do about your relationship stuff, so that you are not making decisions based on pressure or panic.

What does it mean to become the dominant parrot? It means that you decide that you are going to calmly step into a leadership role.

Have you ever owned a parrot? I used to have an African Grey. My spouse and I had her, a long time ago. And as much as I wish I could say otherwise, we were not good parrot parents. Or parrot keepers, or whatever you want to call us. And one of the many things that I did not do well in my relationship with our African Grey was assume a dominant role. I was always afraid that the bird was going to bite me. And I can't remember what came first, the fear or the biting, but she did bite me a few times, and I totally let that get to me. And I allowed myself to be both resentful of the bird, and timid around her. Part of the problem in my mind was that the parrot liked my spouse better, and totally let him manhandle her, and I felt very rejected and very sorry for myself because of this. I thought the bird should like us both equally and I blamed the parrot for not responding to me in the way she responded to my spouse.

Ep #102: You Got Caught Cheating

And of course, this didn't somehow make the bird any friendlier with me, and this attitude of mine totally got in the way of me taking on the role of the dominant parrot. One of the pieces of guidance that I got kind of late in the game was that in your relationship with your bird, you have to be the dominant parrot. You have to take charge for setting the tone of the relationship. You have to take responsibility for managing your own energy, and your behavior then flows from that. If you're afraid of the bird, you're going to behave differently than if you're confident with the bird, and the bird is going to pick up on that.

But instead of taking responsibility for any of that, I just wanted the parrot to cuddle up to me and like me. I just wanted the parrot to do what I wanted it to do. I didn't understand that I had a role to play in determining how that relationship was going to go, and as such, I let the bird run the show, and then I got mad at it when I didn't like how the bird responded to me. And that of course was just not fair.

Now, interacting with parrots is different from interacting with humans in some respects, but there are important cues we can take from this story. If you want to set the tone for how things are going to go after your infidelity has been discovered, you have to set the tone! You have to be the dominant parrot! You can't expect your partner to set a tone that's going to please you. If you want the situation to unfold in a way that you're okay with, or at least reasonably with, you have to be willing to step into a leadership role.

Ep #102: You Got Caught Cheating

And this may not be the first thing you're inclined to do if you are caught cheating! You may be getting bombarded with blame, and/or you may feel a lot of shame! And sometimes when we're feeling blamed or ashamed, we believe that we CAN'T take on any sort of leadership role, or don't have the right to. We may think that if we did the so-called bad thing, we just have to sit down and let the person who is mad at us have their way with us. You may, consciously or unconsciously, take on the role of victim.

But what if it doesn't have to be that way? What if you have every right to assume a leadership role in any moment of your life, by virtue of the fact that it is your life! What if you can be the one who turns a difficult situation into something less difficult, even if your actions were the occasion for the difficult situation to arise?

Nobody's going to give you permission to be the dominant parrot. Well, I'm giving you permission. But beyond that, you have to give yourself permission. You have to be the one who says, all right, this may be a mess, and I may have had a hand in making the mess, but I'm going to do what I can to start to make this situation better.

So, what concrete steps might you take to deal with your situation, once you have decided that you're going to be the dominant parrot?

You might want to start by apologizing. "Might" is the operative word in that sentence. Every situation is different, and if you don't want to apologize,

Ep #102: You Got Caught Cheating

you certainly don't have to! But if it's pretty clear that you're busted, and it's pretty clear that your partner is upset, and you feel bad for being the occasion of hurt feelings on their end, you might want to do some apologizing.

Now, that doesn't mean you have to tell them that you are a terrible person and that you agree that you've done the worst possible thing in the world. You don't have to sign onto the idea that you're awful. But you might want to acknowledge what's happened, own up to whatever they clearly know about, and tell them that you care about how much they're hurting.

And then, the next critical task that you may want to attend to is figuring out what you want to happen next. In the moment you are caught cheating, or confronted with evidence of your cheating, you may not know what you want in regards to your primary relationship, and you may not know what you want in terms of your other relationship, or your extracurricular activities, or whatever you've been doing. And you may want to figure this out for yourself before you commit to any major course of action with your partner! You may not want to promise your partner that you will break it off with your affair partner as soon as the sun rises if you don't know that you actually want to do this. You may not want to promise you'll go to couple's counseling twice a day for the next ten years with your aggrieved partner if you don't even know if you really want to stay in your relationship with them or not. And your decisions about which truths to tell, and which to withhold may be dependent upon what you want to happen next with your relationship.

Ep #102: You Got Caught Cheating

This is why it can be so very valuable to buy yourself some time to think.

In the service of this, you may want to say something to your partner like, I care about you so much, and I'm truly sorry about this, and I know I've fucked up, but I'm totally in shock right now, as I imagine you may be as well, and I would really like to allow both of us the opportunity to calm down before we talk much more about this.

Now, your partner may not WANT to give you the opportunity to calm down. So you may need to be prepared to firmly advocate for what you want. You might need to say something like, "I'm truly sorry about this, and I really want to do right by you, but I need some time to get my shit together, and figure out where I am with all of this before I promise you anything, or answer any of your questions," or whatever.

Saying anything along these lines will probably require you to be the calmest person in the room. You will need to be willing to be the dominant parrot.

This may not be easy, and it may seem counterintuitive to do this if someone is screaming at you and demanding answers to all sorts of questions you wish they weren't asking you, but here's the reason why it's valuable to do this. If you do not have time to step back and think about what you want, and how you're going to frame your case, so to speak, you may end up digging yourself into a very deep hole.

Ep #102: You Got Caught Cheating

For example: some people's reaction to being confronted with irrefutable evidence that they've been cheating is to confess EVERY imaginable detail. And some people's immediate reaction is to attempt to deny the whole thing. Both of these impulses are totally human, but acting on either of them may not serve you all that well.

I encourage you to consider trusting that if you take the time to slow down and get clear on what you really want, it will ultimately be better for both you and your partner than you making a bunch of hasty promises that you aren't sure if really want to keep, or telling a bunch of truths OR lies that you don't really know if you want to tell.

Now, once you buy yourself some time to get clear on what you want, you have to actually set about doing this. And I can help you do that. If you're reeling from getting busted cheating, I can help you navigate the immediate aftermath of the discovery, and help you determine your next steps. No matter how urgent and frantic your current situation may seem, it is both possible and worth it to slow down a little, and become the calm in the center of the storm. And I can teach you how to do that. So if you're ready to talk, you can schedule an introductory coaching session with me through my website, mariemurphyhd.com. I offer compassionate, confidential coaching via Zoom, so we can work together no matter where you're located.

Ep #102: You Got Caught Cheating

All right everyone, thank you so much for listening. Have an amazing week! Bye for now.