

Ep #115: From an Affair to a Non-Affair Relationship



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Dr. Marie Murphy

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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 judgements. If you would like my help sorting out your infidelity situation in a way that's truly right for you, let's work together. You can schedule an introductory coaching session with me through my website, mariemurphyphd.com. I offer compassionate, confidential coaching via Zoom, which means we can work together no matter where you're located. Lately I've gotten more than the usual number of inquiries asking if I work with clients outside of the United States, and the answer is yes, I absolutely do. As long as you can make my availability work for your time zone, we can totally work together. The other thing, of course, is that the only language I'm fluent in is English, and I'm not proud of that, but that's a whole 'nother story for another day. Anyway, the point is, thanks to the wonders of technology, I can and do work with clients in a variety of locations, and you can book an appointment with me through my website, mariemurphyphd.com.

Today we are going to talk about relationships that start off as affairs becoming "normal" relationships, or non-affair relationships. The transition from affair partner to partner. Or the transition from a relationship occurring within the context of infidelity to all of the infidelity being removed from the equation.

And before I go any further, let me just say, as I periodically do, that the language we use to talk about infidelity isn't all that great. We use words like "affair" and "cheating" and "adultery" that are SO loaded. And as you know, if you've been listening to this podcast for a while, my agenda is to approach infidelity from a neutral perspective. And on the one hand, I want to acknowledge these negative connotations. I want to acknowledge that collective attitudes towards the assortment of behaviors we think of as

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infidelity are anything but neutral, at times. But I don't want to reify or reinforce any blanket judgments of infidelity. So I get stuck in this tricky bind where I don't love using the standard language that we use to talk about infidelity, but I also don't want to use ridiculously complicated language, or make up new words. I might start doing that at some point, but I don't think today's the day for that. Who knows, though. I've been talking all day and I'm starting to stumble over my words so maybe a new word will come out of my mouth by accident. Anyway, in the absence of any new linguistic creations, today I'm going to use the word "affair" a lot, and I want you to know that I'm using this word and all the other infidelity words lightly. I'm using them because they're the language we currently have available to us, even though I don't like their negative connotations.

It's important to talk about how the language we use to talk about infidelity is loaded because it ties into the fact that a lot of people consciously believe or have half-consciously assumed that relationships that start out as affairs, or relationships that start out with one or more parties doing something that might count as infidelity, are doomed to fail. Right? I hear this all the time. People, including some of my clients, will tell me, as if it is an objective fact that cannot be negotiated, that a relationship that began as an affair will never work out. Sometimes people really don't WANT this to be true, but they think it's a truth handed down by the highest authorities, human and non-human, that simply cannot be escaped. And I think this speaks to the prevalence and extent of antipathy we have toward infidelity as a society. We have this shared idea, which is pretty powerful, even when it's vague, that infidelity is this really bad thing, and nothing good can come of it.

Just to be really clear, I'm not saying that EVERYONE on the face of the earth buys into this way of thinking. I sure don't! But a lot of people do believe this stuff, and it's important to acknowledge that, even as I also

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stress that not EVERYONE thinks this way. I'm somewhat sympathetic when people believe that a relationship that started out as an affair just can't work out, and here is why. Many humans love black and white thinking in any or all areas of their lives. We don't just think that infidelity is categorically bad, with no room for an appreciation of context or nuance. We think a LOT of things are categorically bad. Or categorically good. We love our dualistic, good-or-bad, right-or-wrong thinking. And I am sympathetic to this, because the world is complex, and the experience of being a human can be confounding and painful, and we're all just trying to get through life as best as we can, and one of the ways people love to do that is by attempting to impose order onto the supposed chaos of the world. And we often do that by looking at aspects of the human experience in very dualistic terms. We think it makes things so much simpler to have a very clear and fixed sense of what is good and bad.

Although I am totally sympathetic to this kind of thinking, I am not a proponent of it. I am a firm believer in the value of embracing shades of grey, and getting away from dualistic thinking to the best of our abilities. In relation to infidelity, and in relation to everything else. And by the way, appreciating life's nuances, appreciating the greyscale, and stepping away from dualistic, either-or thinking does not mean that don't get to make clear decisions about what we want to do in life and what we don't want to do. It means we can make these decisions without condemning or rejecting what we don't want. We can move towards what's right for us without getting attached to a set of absolute rights or absolute wrongs.

Now, getting back to the specifics of infidelity, and whether or not a relationship that starts as an affair can "successfully" transition to a non-affair relationship, here's a question for you. Why would we ever want to believe that any relationship is doomed to fail, whether it's because it

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started off as an affair, or for any other reason? What do we get out of that line of thinking?

My observation is that one of the things we sometimes get out of telling ourselves a relationship can't possibly work out is for protection – or a sense of protection, anyway – from emotional pain.

When we tell ourselves that something can't work out, or definitely isn't going to work out, what we're often doing, at least to an extent, is trying to protect ourselves from disappointment, or sadness, or grief. Wanting something, allowing ourselves to desire something and allowing ourselves to acknowledge that desire, can be a rather vulnerable place to be. We put ourselves in the position of risking not getting what we want, and we may not like that! And so when we cut ourselves off from our desires by saying, "Oh, this relationship will never work, because relationships that start as affairs never do," we may get the illusion of certainty or control, which may seem reassuring, even though it is an illusion, and we may get to avoid the pain of wanting something and not knowing if or when we'll have it. And this really can seem like a benefit! This really can seem like a win. And maybe it is! But, I will tell you that when we attempt to avoid the feeling of disappointment or hurt or sadness or vulnerability, we usually cut ourselves off from feeling the kinds of feelings we really want to experience, too.

In addition, when we tell ourselves that a relationship isn't going to work, when we believe that a relationship can't possibly work out, that influences our behavior! When we believe something is true, we tend to act as if it is so. When we believe a relationship isn't going to work and we don't give it a chance to work, or we don't engage in the relationship with the intention of making it work, we are very likely to prove ourselves right! And thus, we may get to experience some sort of certainty, but we also may cut

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ourselves off from the joy that we might find when we allow ourselves to pursue a relationship that we really want to pursue, even if that entails uncertainty and vulnerability.

People always ask me if it's POSSIBLE for an affair to turn into a successful non-affair relationship. And as I said earlier, a lot of people assume that this really isn't possible, but they want me to prove them wrong.

Here's the thing. I can tell you that relationships that start as affairs, or relationships that begin within the context of some sort of infidelity DO turn into wonderful, "successful," lasting, loving, non-affair relationships. I see it happen all the time, and there are plenty of other people's stories that are out there in the public domain for you to take up as evidence that it is indeed possible for people to transition from an affair to a non-affair relationship, and live happily ever after, so to speak. For example, Gina Frangello, who I interviewed on this podcast in episode 40, writes about her experiences with her affair partner who then became just her partner in her memoir, *Blow Your House Down*. But that's just one person's example. There are others out there, if you look for them, but here's the thing. It doesn't really matter how much evidence exists out there in the world that an affair relationship can "successfully" turn into a non-affair relationship. It doesn't really matter if other people have done it – or not done it, for that matter. What matters is whether or not you believe it is possible for YOU to transition your affair relationship to a non-affair relationship. That's what matters.

So I'm going to suggest some ways of thinking about transitioning from an affair relationship to a non-affair relationship that will help you cultivate belief that it is entirely possible to do this "successfully."

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Before I do that, though, let me just say that I don't love using the word "success" in relation to relationships. What exactly does "success" in a relationship mean? People have lots of interesting ideas about what constitutes a successful relationship, and these ideas may or may not be all that helpful. For instance, some people believe that the only way a relationship can be successful is for it to take the form of a legal and monogamous marriage, and end only with the death of one or both parties. I know that may be an ideal that a lot of people hold, but that doesn't mean that we have to buy into the idea that that's what a successful relationship looks like, or the only form of a successful relationship. Anyway, clarifying our vision of what it means to have a "successful" relationship is another topic for another day, but for now, let me just reiterate the point that a relationship that starts as an affair can be just as successful – whatever that may mean – as any other relationship.

To that effect, the first general point I want you to consider is that relationships that start as affairs, or start out with some sort of an infidelity element may be more similar to, than different from, any other relationship. I know we tend to think that infidelity is this SUPER significant thing, and I fully appreciate that it can make for some complicated and unpleasant dynamics. But it also doesn't have to be as big of a deal as we make it into. A lot of relationships begin within circumstances that we tend to consider "complicated." A lot of people think their relationship is forbidden, or is frowned upon, for various reasons. People experience all kinds of challenges, internal and external, in the beginnings of their relationships. We don't have to keep buying into the idea that infidelity is this uniquely bad thing.

Furthermore, quite fundamentally, in any relationship, you have two humans interacting with each other, with their crazy human minds doing

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crazy human mind things. And if you're in a relationship that includes more than two people, you just add. Or multiply. Or whatever! Even if the math changes, in relationships, no matter what, we're always going to be dealing with our own mind stuff, and another person and their mind stuff. Or other personS, plural, and their mind stuff. Period. Cheating or no cheating. Adultery or no adultery. Infidelity or no infidelity.

And it's what goes on in our minds that makes a relationship challenging or not challenging, rather than the specifics of our circumstances per se. I'm not denying the importance of the facts of our lives. Of course they matter. But it's what we make them mean that determines their significance to us. For instance, some people consider an age difference of five years between two members of a couple to be a really big deal, and a potentially insurmountable hurdle. Other people deal with their families and friends disowning them because they don't approve of their relationship choices, and although the person who gets disowned may not LIKE that, they decide they're not going to let that deter them from pursuing the relationship they want to have.

On a related note, the SECOND general point I want to make is that just like no relationship is automatically doomed to fail, no relationship is guaranteed to "succeed." We can't know for sure, at the outset of any relationship, how long it will last, or whether or not we will like everything that happens within the context of a relationship. Sometimes we have the idea that if we pick the "right person" for us, and if our relationship starts off in the "right way," we'll be guaranteed an particular outcome, but that isn't how it works.

That might sound pessimistic, but it isn't, and here's the other side to that coin: no matter what happens in a relationship, we can take radical

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responsibility for how we engage in it. If we want to create a loving, lasting relationship, we can take it upon ourselves to learn how to do everything we can to create that. And I would argue that when we take radical responsibility for how we participate in a relationship, that relationship can be considered a “success” in some very important respects, even if the relationship doesn’t last as long as we would like it to, and even if things happen within the relationship that we don’t like.

One of the big questions we all get to answer in our love lives is, what do I want to contribute to any romantic situation I’m a part of? We often focus on what we’re going to GET out of a relationship, or what we DON’T have the power to determine within a relationship, but it is so much more powerful and freeing to focus on what we do have the power to determine. So let’s say you have this nagging idea that your relationship might be doomed to fail because it started out as an affair. EVEN IF the cards were truly stacked against you in some non-negotiable way, you still get to decide what you want to do with that. Your fate isn’t pre-determined.

Now, in addition to those general things that are important to keep in mind, there are a few specific things I want to say about transitioning from an affair to a non-affair relationship.

Number one: in any relationship, you get to decide how you want the relationship to progress. You get to decide if and how you want to formalize your relationship, or make particular commitments to your partner, and in what time frame. This applies to most relationships, perhaps any relationship that isn’t arranged by outside parties, whether it starts as an affair or not. There are always questions like, when do we decide that we’re officially a couple? When do we tell people about our

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relationship? Do we want to move in together, and if so, when? How do we want to define the terms and conditions of our relationship? Etcetera.

Sometimes, in relationships that started as affairs, it seems like the couple's history makes these questions particularly loaded, or particularly tricky to answer. For example, sometimes people think that because they had a secret history before they became an above-board couple, that means they have to accelerate their commitment to their former affair partner who is now just their partner. The logic is sometimes that because they already know each other so well, they need to quickly formalize their relationship in particular ways. Or, the logic may be that they have left one sure thing, and thus they need to make sure that their new relationship is a sure thing.

Or, sometimes people believe the opposite is true. Sometimes people think that their entire history with their affair partner who is now just their partner doesn't "count," because it wasn't a "real" relationship when it was an affair relationship. Therefore, some people think, they have to start from scratch with their former affair partner. Sometimes people think that they can't even assume that they have a relationship with their former affair partner – even if both of them have just left their prior relationships with the intention of making it possible for the two of them to be together.

Here's the deal, people. There aren't any rules about this stuff. There's nothing that says that you need to attempt to go back to square one with the person who used to be your affair partner after the affair aspect of your relationship technically ends. There's nothing that says that your history as an affair couple doesn't "count". And similarly, there's nothing that says that if you were together in an affair for a certain amount of time – even if it was what you consider a very substantial amount of time – you and your

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person need to, say, move in together right away as soon as the infidelity component of your relationship gets taken care of.

Just like in any other relationship, it behooves us to get really clear on what we want, versus looking for a set of external rules to tell us what we want, or tell us what's going to work out well for us. We need to get clear on what role, or what purpose, we want a romantic relationship to serve in our lives. Back in episode 41 I talked about clarifying what you want in a romantic relationship, and any change in our romantic lives can be a great occasion to rigorously check in with ourselves about what we want in our love life. Beginning a new phase of any relationship is a wonderful time to clarify our intentions for how we want to engage with our partner, and for what we want to create in our relationship. It can also be a great time to clean up our thinking about what might stand in the way of our relationship being "successful." Put differently, it's a great opportunity to consciously orient ourselves to whatever we perceive the challenges in our relationship to be. And of course, these are all things I help people do, and I can help you do these things, too.

Point number two is closely related to point number one: for many people, part of the point of being in a romantic relationship is to have some source of security and comfort. Or that's one of the benefits that a lot of people get out of being in a relationship. And there's a lot I could say about security and comfort, but I'm not going to say all of the things right now. For now, what I'll just say is that security and comfort can be wonderful things, to a point. It's nice to have a sense of continuity and stability in our lives, and when that's combined with love and companionship, that can be really wonderful.

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It is important to remember, though, that it's never another person in and of themselves that creates stability and comfort for us. It's never being in a relationship that MAKES us feel stable or comfortable. It's never the particular terms and conditions of our relationship, meaning for instance, have we agreed with our partner that we are officially dating? Or have we moved in together? Or have we gotten married or engaged or formalized our commitment in some other way? It's fine to want to get married. Or to do any of the things I just mentioned. But it isn't getting married or moving in together that will make you feel safe or comfortable or secure in your relationship. We create those kinds of feelings for ourselves through our thinking. So we've got to learn how to take responsibility for what we are thinking if we want to have the experience of our relationship that we want to have.

Sometimes I'll talk to people who are beginning the non-affair phase of their relationship with their former affair partner and I'll say, "How are things going?" and they'll say, well, great, but I think things will be a lot better once the future of our relationship is more certain. And I'll say, okay, what do you mean by that? And they'll say, "Well, I just need to know when we're going to get engaged, and then I'll feel okay." Not everyone does this, by the way, but it's not uncommon. And it seems so very seductively logical to say something like that, and to think that once you're engaged, the relationship is a for sure thing, and then you'll feel secure and comfortable. But you can choose to feel secure and comfortable no matter what is or isn't going on in your relationship. You do not need to make your security and comfort contingent upon the specifics of what's going on in your relationship.

Now, on a slightly different note, sometimes we get into very familiar patterns with partners we have a very established relationship with. And we may find these familiar patterns very comfortable and very safe and

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very reassuring, even if we also didn't like those familiar patterns and routines in some ways. People tell me all the time that the best part of their relationship with their spouse or partner is watching tv shows with them that they both love. And even if people are pretty sure they want to leave their spouse so they can pursue a relationship with their affair partner, they may be very concerned about what life would be like without their very comfortable routine of watching TV shows they like with their spouse. And even if you don't watch tv with your spouse, or don't value watching tv with your spouse or partner, there may be some aspect of your relationship with them that is so familiar and comfortable to you that you can't imagine life without that.

But of course, some people DO choose to leave the familiarity of their marriage or their prior relationship so that they can pursue their relationship with their affair partner, even though they valued the comfort they derived from the familiarity of their marriage. And for some people, this doesn't end up being that big of a deal. Some people leave the comfort and familiarity of their old relationship behind and pretty much never look back.

But people experience what I like to call a comfort deficit. They may not have wanted to stay with their former spouse or partner, but they really do miss the security and familiarity they got out of staying in that relationship. And that's totally normal, it's not a problem, it's something that we can learn how to deal with CONSCIOUSLY.

What sometimes happens, though, is that we're so desperate for comfort and we're so used to thinking that our romantic relationship should be the source of our comfort, that we expect to get that from our new partner, i.e., our former affair partner. And although I think this impulse to turn to our partner for a sense of safety and comfort is totally understandable, we may

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not like what happens when we expect our partner to provide a sense of safety or comfort for us. For instance, we may expect them to do things the way our former partner did them, because that's been our standard for how people should operate with each other when they're in a committed relationship, and it seems very strange or wrong to deviate from what we think the standards are.

One of our opportunities lies in learning how to digest the strangeness of change, or the lack of familiar comfort we may feel in our new set of circumstances, without expecting our new partner to relieve us of all of our uncomfortable feelings.

Another of our opportunities lies in learning how to enjoy our new partner, or our old-new partner, and our old-new relationship without clinging to it, or them, like a life raft. For some of us, this is a really big opportunity to learn and grow. We may not know how to enjoy a relationship without depending on it for a sense of safety or comfort or stability. We may not have any idea how we can create these kinds of experiences for ourselves. And we may need to learn how to do these things, and that's totally okay, because we can learn, and I can teach you.

That brings me to point number three, which is that no matter where you go, there you are. It's very easy to think that when we leave a romantic relationship that we were dissatisfied with, and start up a new relationship with someone we're a lot more excited about, that everything's going to be different. We may think that the whole reason why we got together with our affair partner in the first place is because our relationship with our old partner was so bad, or we were so badly matched with our old partner, or both of those things, or whatever, and now that we've met this amazing new person, everything's going to be great.

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And everything CAN be great. It absolutely can. But, we need to remember that even if we didn't like our old relationship, we were a partial contributor to whatever it was that was happening in that relationship. Have you ever heard the saying, "Whenever there's a problem, you're there"? I am not sure who gets credit for that one, but it's important to remember that whenever something is going on that we don't like, we are by definition present for it in order to have witnessed for it, so it's worth our while to ask ourselves how we may have been contributing to it.

Sometimes people get freaked out by these kinds of suggestions, because they don't like the idea that they might have been to blame for relationship dynamics that they didn't like, and that they thought were not their fault. It can seem really threatening to consider that we might have had any sort of role in creating a situation that we didn't like when we think in terms of perpetrators and victims, or fault and innocence. We don't want to be the bad guy, so to speak, the bad person, the bad-doer, and it may seem like the only alternative to being the bad guy is to be the good guy, or the good person, or the good-doer.

Here's one little example of what that can look like. So often, people tell me that they tried to communicate differently with their former partner, or their soon-to-be-former partner, but it was just impossible. And I fully understand that we may find the experience of communicating with some people to be really challenging, and that's fair. But we're participating in the communication that happens in any relationship, too. We are a part of the communication endeavor. And we stand to gain so much more when we're willing to look at what we are contributing to the situation – or not contributing to the situation – instead of pinning all the blame on the other person. That doesn't mean that you aren't allowed to dislike how someone else communicates. You can! That's fair! But you can do that without

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blaming them, and while also taking responsibility for your own participation in the dynamic.

Quite simply, we don't have to get all wrapped up in blaming anyone – whether it's ourselves, or someone else. So often we make our dissatisfaction with our relationships a matter of what the other person is doing wrong – or what we are doing wrong – but we don't have to go there. It can be so much more helpful to be willing to look at our own tendencies with loving awareness, and see if our tendencies, or the way we habitually engage in our relationships, is helping us create the kinds of relationship experiences that we want to have.

This is so important to be aware of when we're in the beginning stages of a new relationship, or in a new phase of a not-so-new relationship, because we tend to think that when we meet someone new and great, everything's going to be so much better with them than it was with our former partner. And, to echo what I said earlier, everything CAN be really great with your new partner. But it's also important to be aware that unless we take responsibility for our tendencies, and for how we participate in relationships, we bring those tendencies with us. And if we're not conscious of that, our tendencies are very likely to present themselves in our new relationship, even if the person we're involved with is very different from our old partner.

And let me stress this is not a PROBLEM. Having tendencies, having blind spots, having so-called imperfections or whatever you want to call them is not a PROBLEM. There's nothing wrong with you for being the human you are. The point of becoming aware of our tendencies – in relationships or any other area of our lives – is not to scold ourselves or judge ourselves or blame ourselves. Rather, the point is to become more conscious of how

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we are contributing to experiences that we may think are “just happening” to us. And from there, we can become more conscious participants in creating more of the experiences we want to have in our relationships.

And to that effect, I’ll share one of my favorite quotes from Rumi:

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and right doing there is a field. I’ll meet you there.

When the soul lies down in that grass, the world is too full to talk about.

Ideas, language, even the phrase “each other” doesn’t make any sense.

In other words, we don’t have to blame ourselves or anyone else in order to evolve into the person we want to be in our relationships.

There’s another thing I want to talk about in relation to transitioning from an affair relationship to a non-affair relationship, and that is jealousy, but I’m going to give that its own episode because it’s such an interesting and important topic and I have a lot to say about it.

So that’s it for today! I want to tell you that it is one thing to listen to me talk on the podcast and it’s another thing entirely to have me as your coach, and have me help you apply the kinds of concepts I talk about on the podcast to your own life. Listening to podcasts can be GREAT and can be very beneficial! But there is a difference between the process of passively listening to material that is interesting or inspiring, and actively learning how to use new tools to address the specific challenges of your life. Passive learning can be helpful, there’s no doubt about that. But if you’re serious

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about making change, and you're ready to get down to business, working with a coach may be the most valuable investment in yourself and your life that you ever make. If you're ready to work with me, you can schedule an introductory coaching session with me through my website, mariemurphyphd.com. I can't wait to meet you.

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