

Ep #110: What Do You Owe Someone You've Cheated On?



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With Your Host

Dr. Marie Murphy

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Hi everyone, I'm Dr. Marie Murphy. I'm a relationship coach, and if you are engaging in anything you think counts as infidelity, I can help you deal with your feelings, clarify what you want, and make decisions about what you're going to do. No shame, no blame, no judgments. If you're ready to deal with 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 confidential, compassionate coaching via Zoom, which means we can work together no matter where you're located.

Okay! Today we are going to talk about what you might – or might not – owe someone who you have cheated on. And we're going to talk about what you might owe YOURSELF if you have cheated on someone.

Let's say you have been in a committed relationship, and you've done something that counts as cheating in the context of your relationship, and your committed partner knows about it. Maybe they discovered what you were doing, maybe you told them about what you were doing, or maybe it was a little of both, but the point for our purposes today is that they know you've been doing something that they consider cheating.

A lot of people who are in this situation find themselves grappling with questions about what they owe their partner, or what they have to do for their partner, or what they owe the relationship by virtue of having cheated. Sometimes these questions are self-generated, or primarily self-generated. Sometimes these questions are inspired by their aggrieved partner, and their partner's actions, which may take the form of requests or demands or questions or ultimatums. And sometimes questions about what the cheater owes their partner are inspired by a third party, or outside resources, such

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as a couple's therapist, or a book that tells you what's supposed to happen after someone in a relationship has cheated. Or "how to repair" a relationship after someone has cheated. And of course, many people contend with all THREE of these influences at once. We may have our own ideas about what we might or might not owe our partner as a result of us having cheated, and our partner may have some very distinct ideas about this, and we may also have a couple's therapist who is weighing in, or we may be reading some book that has some very specific instructions about what we should do.

Before I go any further, I want to return to a point I've made on the podcast before, but haven't emphasized lately. The language we use to talk about infidelity is VERY loaded. The word "cheating" has pretty negative connotations. And a lot of the other words we use to talk about infidelity are similarly loaded with negative connotations. I'm not all that enthusiastic about the word "infidelity," actually, but I usually think of it as at least a LITTLE less loaded than "cheating." Anyway, it's a constant challenge for me to balance my desire to use language to talk about infidelity that's as neutral as possible with my desire to avoid using language in a way that's very awkward or clunky. So I could say things like, "people engaging in behaviors that many people think of as cheating" instead of saying, "cheaters." But that quickly becomes a little awkward and potentially very confusing. So for the sake of trying to be clear and efficient in my use of language, I use terminology that I don't really like very much. I think it would be great to develop a whole new vocabulary to use to talk about "cheating" or the behaviors we call cheating, but for today's purposes, I am going to use the words "cheat" and "cheating" and "cheated" and "cheater" a lot. With apologies.

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Now I want to suggest that there IS indeed something you might owe someone who you've cheated on. But I'm not going to tell you what it is right away. Before I do that, I'm going to tell you what a lot of other people think you owe someone you've cheated on.

A lot of people believe that if you cheat, you have done something that is categorically bad, and maybe not just bad, but the worst possible thing you could do to another person. Therefore, it is incumbent upon you, the cheater, to agree that you've done something very, very bad, and to show regret and remorse, and to do anything and everything you can to repair your relationship. This may include making your partner feel better. This may include taking responsibility for your actions. This may include acknowledging that you've done something hurtful. This may include agreeing to a whole set of protocols to "re-establish trust."

Here's what this might look like in practice:

Someone has cheated on their partner, and their partner has found out. Maybe the person doing the cheating told them what they were up to, maybe there was some sort of discovery, but at any rate, both members of the couple know what happened, and the person who was cheated on is not happy about it. They are hurt. They are angry. And they feel really, really justified in being hurt and angry, and they expect their cheating partner to do something about it. They want their partner to have to suffer like they're suffering. They want them to atone for their sins. To right the wrongs. To make up for what they've done.

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And so, the person who was cheated on may tell their partner exactly how angry they are, over and over again. They may blame them for causing their pain. And they might make a lot of requests, or demands. They may expect detailed answers to any and all questions they might ask their partner about the cheating and what transpired. They may expect said questions to be answered at any time of day or night. They may believe that they have the right to monitor the cheater's devices and email accounts and social media and all that stuff. They may expect to have access to their cheating partner's thoughts. They may want to know if their cheating partner ever thinks of the person they cheated with, and how they feel about them. They may expect you to go to couple's therapy, or maybe couple's therapy AND individual therapy. And so on and so on.

If your partner is asking you to do these kinds of things, and you're doing them because you want to be doing them, by all means, carry on! You certainly don't need to change what you're doing if it's working for you.

But the key part of that last sentence is, working for YOU.

I regularly work with clients who have been cheating, and their partner has been found out about their cheating and isn't happy about it, and they're in the midst of an experience like the one I just described, and they feel terrible. They feel terrible because their partner is upset and they think it's all their fault, they feel terrible because they got caught cheating, AND they really don't like acquiescing to their partner's responses to them cheating. They don't WANT to be berated over and over again. They don't WANT to answer a million questions about what transpired. They don't want to surrender their passwords or submit to digital surveillance. They don't want to have to keep promising that they want to save the relationship.

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When clients tell me that they're in the midst of a situation like this, I ask them why they keep doing these things if they don't want to do them. And people often say, "Because I think I have to." Or, "Because I owe it to them." And when I ask them why they think they have to do whatever they're doing, or WHY they think they owe it to their partner, the response is usually because their partner said so, or because their couple's therapist said so, or maybe their partner AND their couple's therapist said so.

Now, again, if you are doing these things because you want to be doing them, that is one thing. And I'm not trying to call out couple's therapists here. I'm calling out this particular sort of guidance, or these particular instructions, which do come from couple's therapists sometimes.

But here's the deal, people. If you are doing things that you really don't want to do because you think you have to do them, it is time to step back and examine your operating assumptions. You don't HAVE to do anything. You really don't. There might be good reasons why you would freely choose to do things you don't really want to do sometimes, but that's different. If you have signed onto the idea that you have to do anything because someone else says so, you may want to examine your beliefs about the choices you have.

What's often going on in the kind of situation I've described is the person who cheated is really distressed and just wants the whole situation to be better, and they think the way to do that is by doing whatever their partner asks of them. And this often goes nowhere fast, or nowhere very good fast, for many reasons. Reason number one is that we do not ever MAKE anyone feel anything. We are never the CAUSE of other people's

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emotions. We may be the occasion of their feelings, but it is their THOUGHTS about us and our actions that create whatever specific feelings they are experiencing, not us or our actions per se. No matter what we may do to try to relieve them of their anger or hurt or whatever they're feeling, digesting their feelings is something they and only they can do for themselves. We could fulfil their every request and demand, and they might never feel better.

Now, your partner may not know that. They may think that if they get you to give them an hourly report on what you are thinking about the person you cheated with, they'll feel better. They may think that if they monitor all of your devices, they'll be able to trust you again. They may truly believe that if you answer every question they ask you about what happened with you and the other person, they'll find some kind of relief. They may think that if you tell them how sorry you are enough times, they'll feel reassured.

They may think that you doing certain things is going to make them feel better, but I can assure you that it doesn't work that way. I do not recommend you try to convince them of that, however. Let them deal with their stuff. What it's important for YOU to know is that if you think that acquiescing to all of their anger- and hurt-fueled demands is going to help them, you're barking up the wrong tree. You're not going to be able to fix their feelings, no matter what you do. Yes, you might want to take responsibility for your actions. You might want to engage differently your relationship. But that doesn't mean you have to do whatever they want you to do, and it doesn't mean you have to try to make everything better for them. It is not within your power to do that.

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This is true even if you're SURE you want to stay in the relationship with the person you cheated on, and make amends and make it work. You doing a bunch of things you really don't want to do just because your partner says you have to do them and you feel bad about something you've done is not going to create a relationship dynamic that you feel great about.

But here's what happens a LOT. In addition to feeling bad about what they've done, and feeling bad that their partner is hurting, the person who cheated may also be very freaked out about the possibility of their relationship with their partner coming to an end. BUT, they also may not know if they really want to continue the relationship with the person they cheated on. They may be very AFRAID of losing that relationship, but that's not the same as really wanting to make the relationship work. And when you're totally freaked out about having been caught cheating, and upset because your partner is upset, and worried about potentially losing a relationship you're scared to lose, questions about what you REALLY want in terms of the future of the relationship may be the farthest thing from your mind. And this, as you might imagine, can create some very interesting problems.

Now I'm going to tell you what I think you owe someone you've cheated on. Are you ready? Remember, my opinion is an opinion. It's not some truth that handed down by a supernatural force. It's not a law. But, it might be an opinion worth considering. Here it is. I believe that what you owe someone you've cheated on is honesty about where you want the relationship to go. And the key word in that sentence is YOU. Where do YOU want the relationship to go? Not where does your partner want it to go, but where do YOU want it to go? What do YOU want?

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Perhaps obviously, being honest with your partner about what you want requires you to be radically honest with YOURSELF about what you want.

But even though that may sound obvious, being honest with yourself may seem easier said than done. You may not have given yourself the opportunity to be honest with yourself about what you really want to have happen with this relationship in quite some time. You may have been in the habit of being devoted to your relationship regardless of how you actually feel about the relationship for quite some time. Before your cheating was discovered or disclosed, the cheating itself may have helped you avoid questions about what you really wanted to do about your primary relationship. And now that your cheating IS known about, you may be so preoccupied with your partner's hurt or anger that you aren't thinking about what YOU want at all. ALL of your energy may be devoted to apologizing to your partner, and trying to make them feel better or not hate you or both. You may be dedicating yourself to the endeavor of saving your relationship... by doing all the things your partner asks of you, or all of the things your couple's therapist has told you to do... but you may not be sure that your relationship is something you really want to save.

And not wanting to take that question on may make it all the more appealing to throw yourself into the endeavor of trying to fix your partner's feelings. Fearing what you might discover if you allowed yourself to consider what you really want with your primary relationship can keep you looking for ways to distract yourself from that question forever. Literally.

Now, I'm not saying that what you really want is to leave your primary relationship, and that everything you're doing to deal with the matter of your cheating is simply a distraction from that eventual realization. That is NOT

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my point. But I am saying that if you just go into full-on damage control mode without being really sure of what you want, you aren't really doing anyone any big favors. If you really want to "do the right thing" for your partner and your relationship, you have to figure out what the right thing for YOU is. And that may require you to step back a little. That may require you to focus on YOURSELF, instead of trying to mollify your partner. You may need to give yourself some time and space and permission to cultivate radical honesty with yourself about what you really want right now.

This might mean that you set limits on what you're willing to talk about with your partner. It may mean that you tell them that you aren't sure how you feel about the relationship, instead of doing everything you can to try to "fix" it. It may mean that you spend more time thinking about what YOU want than about what they want. It may mean that you give yourself some time away from your partner. It might mean that you seek out resources exclusively for the purpose of supporting YOURSELF, instead of, perhaps, supporting the relationship.

Giving yourself permission to do any of the things I just mentioned may require you to confront all of your people-pleasing impulses! So many of us have been trained to believe that our safety and security and comfort depend upon making sure other people are okay, and are okay with US. And when we have done something that someone we care about doesn't like, especially if it's something that a lot of people agree is categorically bad, and even MORE especially if it's something that we ourselves don't feel great about, we may have a really hard time believing that we don't have to prioritize pleasing our partner.

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And to that effect, sometimes people tell me that doing what their partner asks of them after they've cheated, even if they really don't want to do it, isn't actually a form of people-pleasing. They tell me that it's just what they HAVE to do, given that what they did was wrong, and given that it's totally legitimate for their partner to ask them to do anything to make up for what they've done.

I would argue that doing anything you don't want to do because you think it's going to make someone else feel better, or be happier with you, or less displeased with you IS a form of people-pleasing.

And I would argue that even if you've done something in your relationship that your partner doesn't like, and you don't feel great about, this doesn't mean that anything has gone horribly wrong, in the cosmic scheme of things. When we get intimately involved with another human, we are signing up for surprises. We are signing up for having things happen that we aren't entirely thrilled about. Nobody tells us this, so we can be forgiven for thinking that it's not supposed to be like that. We can all be forgiven for thinking that our partner's job is to do exactly what we want them to do, all the time, so that we can have our relationship be exactly the way we want it to be, all the time. This is how a lot of us think relationships are supposed to go!

But the thing is, that just isn't the way it works. Humans are interesting creatures, and if our partner is human, it's inevitable that they are going to do things that we do not like. Sometimes seemingly little things, sometimes seemingly huge things. And what I want to suggest is that if we accept that this as normal, we can deal with the things that happen in our relationships that we don't like in a completely different way.

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We can accept that we ARE going to be the occasion of other people's pain at times. And we can accept that other people are going to be the occasion of OUR pain at times. How could it be any other way? The point of being alive and forming relationships is not to ensure that we or our partner never have a negative feeling. How could we possibly accomplish that? And moreover, what if there's nothing wrong with so-called negative feelings, or uncomfortable feelings? What if it isn't bad for us to experience them – and it isn't bad for anyone else to, either? I'm not suggesting that we run around being reckless with other people's hearts. And I'm not suggesting that we don't have a right to dislike it if our partner cheats on us. But I am suggesting that even when we do our utmost to live consciously, we're going to do things that other people don't like sometimes. And they may have some feelings as a result of not liking what we do. But what if that doesn't make us a terrible person? What if that just makes us human?

If we accept this, we can take responsibility for our actions in an entirely different way. And we can CARE about other people's feelings, and care that our behavior may have been the occasion of other people's hurt feelings, without attempting to solve for other people's feelings. We have to let other people solve for their own feelings, or else things get pretty messed up pretty quickly.

So. If you've cheated, and your partner knows about it, and they're upset, and you're upset that they're upset, and you've been frantically – or even not-so-frantically – trying to make everything okay, here are my suggestions for you.

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Trust that you can love your partner and care about what they're experiencing without taking it upon yourself to fix their feelings. Saying more about that could make for a whole 'nother episode, or another TEN episodes, but for now, I'll just leave it at that. Trust that you can care about your partner without taking it upon yourself to fix their feelings.

And then, focus on what you owe YOURSELF in your current situation. This may start with DECIDING what you owe yourself. You may want to say that you don't know what you owe yourself, and that's okay, it's fine to start there, but I'm going to let you get away with saying "I don't know what I owe myself" and just sticking with that. You can DECIDE what you owe yourself.

And, of course, you could make use of my suggestions about this. As I've said today, I think you owe yourself the time and space and resources to get clear on what YOU want in your relationship, and what you want to do about your current situation. I think you owe it to yourself to prioritize being honest with yourself about what you want. I think you owe it to yourself to explore what it means to be faithful to yourself, versus frantically trying to be faithful to your partner or your relationship.

I believe that when we do these things, we're better able to honor our relationships. Sometimes we think that the only way to honor a relationship is to stay in it forever, or honor whatever commitments we once made forever. But I want to suggest that sometimes, we may do more to honor a relationship by leaving it, or perhaps changing the way we engage in it. If we believe that romantic relationships are viable if and only if all participants in the relationship truly want to be in the relationship, then we owe it to both ourselves and our partner to get really clear about what we

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want in terms of our relationship with the person we cheated on. Sometimes people think that leaving a relationship after they've cheated is adding insult to injury, and I understand that being on the receiving end of this may HURT. But you may want to consider the possibility that cheating on someone and then staying with them because you feel bad about what you've done and you don't know how to be honest with yourself about what you really want may be an even bigger insult added to the original injury.

All right, everyone! It is one thing to hear me talk about this stuff on the podcast, and it's another thing to have me as your coach, and have my assistance as you apply the things I talk about on the podcast to your own life. If you want my help sorting out your infidelity situation, you can schedule an introductory coaching session with me through my website, mariemurphyphd.com, and you can learn more about the coaching services I offer through the services page of my website.

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