

## Ep #119: Explaining How a Relationship Began



### 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 judgments. I offer confidential, compassionate relationship coaching via Zoom, which means we can work together no matter where you're located. If you're ready to begin the process of resolving your infidelity situation in a way that's truly right for you, you can schedule an introductory coaching session with me through my website, [mariemurphyphd.com](http://mariemurphyphd.com). I can't wait to meet you.

Okay people, the title of today's episode doesn't quite capture what I would like it to. What we're going to talk about is how you might go about telling people the story of how your relationship began if your relationship began as an affair, or began within the context of an infidelity situation of some sort.

And what I want to suggest is that two seemingly competing things can be true at once. The first is that you don't OWE anyone any particular explanation. You don't owe anyone "the truth," whatever that may mean. You don't owe anyone information, or any particular amount of information. You have the right to your privacy, you have the right to keep secrets, you have the right to lie. You don't HAVE to tell everyone or anyone the full story of how your relationship began.

AND you also might WANT to share your story. There may be truths you WANT to tell, even if they could be considered inconvenient truths. You don't have to hide or deny the details of your experience just because other people might not like them.

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In her book titled “In Love,” Amy Bloom tells the story of her husband’s Alzheimer’s diagnosis and eventual death, and it’s a sad and beautiful story which you might find interesting for many reasons, but today the critical detail of her story is this: she and this husband of hers met while they were each committed to other people, and of this circumstance she writes, “We didn’t behave well. We fell in love and left our partners. We didn’t slink out of town, and we glowed like radium.” This is an option for all of us. We can stand up tall and proud, even if our friends and family members voice their shock and disapproval. And, as Amy Bloom tells us, some of their friends did. And everyone survived.

As you may have noticed, humans often LOVE getting all up in the business of other humans. Inquiring minds want to know! People often think that they really have a right to know what’s going on in other people’s lives, and often think that they have a right to have opinions about what other people do and don’t do, and they often think they have a right to share those opinions. A lot of folks spend a lot of time and energy thinking about what other people are doing, and weighing in on what other people are doing, and basically treating other people’s lives like their primary source of entertainment.

And you may be concerned that your infidelity situation will become a matter of great interest to other people, should it become public knowledge. You may be concerned that if your affair partner becomes your “normal” partner, people may have a lot of questions the circumstances in which your relationship began. And you may be very concerned about how you will manage the disclosure of details, and how people will react to these disclosures.

And I am totally sympathetic to these concerns. It may really seem like it’s a matter of life or death, figuratively or literally, if certain people find out

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certain things about how your relationship began. For example, if you're having an affair with your best friend's spouse, and you've known each other's families for ever and ever, it may literally seem like your world is going to fall apart if the two of you decide that you are going to pursue an above-board relationship, and the truth that you were having an affair comes out.

AND, it may also seem like the alternative to the truth coming out is just as bad, if not worse.

Let's say you and your affair partner want to somehow avoid having to have it be known that the two of you started your relationship while you were both married, and so you hatch this elaborate plan to each leave your respective marriages, and then make it look like your relationship began after each of you got divorced. Trying to pull this kind of thing off can be a herculean task on so many different levels – emotionally, logistically, and otherwise. Also, a certain amount of lying may be essentially baked into this plan. And you might not really want to lie, or at least, you might not want to get caught lying, but you also might think you basically HAVE to lie in order to pull your whole plan off.

You have right to choose to do this kind of thing if you want. But, you also might decide that it's just a lot more trouble than it's worth.

Here's what I encourage you to consider. There may well be times in life when us living out the essence of who we are is going to rub some people the wrong way. There may be times when us living out the truest version of our selves and our lives is going to piss some people off. And for better or worse, people may feel totally entitled to tell us that what we're doing is

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wrong, or that WE are wrong, and being on the receiving end of that may be mighty uncomfortable.

Quite a few folks I've worked with tell me that before they found themselves in an infidelity situation, they'd never really done anything "wrong," so to speak. They'd never really stepped outside of what other people have expected of them. They've basically gone their entire lives without incurring any significant disapproval from others, and the specter of incurring the collective ire seems totally overwhelming to them.

And this is fair enough! If we don't have practice dealing with something, we don't have practice dealing with something!

Here's what I want to suggest, though. Some of us humans incur other people's wrath just by existing. Just by being who we are. If you've managed to avoid being blamed for who you are or how you've been living to this point in your life, you may want to consider your infidelity situation as an initiation into a very prevalent aspect of the human experience. We are all vulnerable to being on the receiving end of other people's unkind behavior – or worse than unkind behavior. If we haven't had to content with much of that thus far in our lives, we might count ourselves lucky. But we also might want to consider that until humans stop judging other humans, we are all vulnerable to being judged.

And instead of trying to avoid that, we have the opportunity to make peace with our own humanity instead. We have the opportunity to accept the human-ness of our own actions.

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Yeah, we may have met someone wonderful while we were committed to someone else. Or while they were committed to someone else. Or both, or whatever. Yes, us falling in love with someone we weren't "supposed" to fall in love with may have created a bit of disruption in our life and in other people's lives. Yes, we may care about the fact that we have occasioned some disruption and hurt feelings. But we can be accountable for this without believing that we have to exile ourselves, or any parts of ourselves. We can take responsibility for our actions without buying into the idea that we have done something unforgiveable.

Let's just say that you and your best friend's spouse fell in love and decided to divorce your spouses and begin an above-board relationship with each other.

In a situation like this, it may be pretty close to impossible to conceal the basic facts of the situation from the parties who are closely involved, and it may be that your wider community finds out about what happened, and there may be gossip and fallout.

You can take responsibility for your behavior without believing that your behavior means you are not worthy of love and inclusion and respect. You can maintain unconditional positive regard for yourself, without this regard being conditional upon you being "perfect." Whatever that might mean.

Sometimes we think it's immoral or even impossible to regard ourselves positively if we've done anything we consider problematic, and this is where other people's negative opinions of us start to matter a LOT. If what other people say about us confirms our own worst fears about ourselves, then of course we're going to feel terrible if they say things that are critical or unkind. Or worse than critical or unkind.

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So often we worry about what we're going to tell other people about our relationship that started as an affair. But what I want you to focus on first is what you tell YOURSELF about your relationship that started as an affair – or started with some kind of an infidelity factor.

Did you start the relationship with the intention of hurting people you care about? Probably not. Did you begin the relationship with the objective of DESTROYING PEOPLE'S LIVES? My guess is no. Did you find yourself in a complicated situation that you didn't know how to handle? Possibly. Did you navigate the situation as best as you could, with whatever resources you had available to you at the time? I bet you did. Can you regard your actions with compassion, even if don't think cheating is awesome, per se?

Now, the central challenge here is that a lot of us have bought into the idea that if we've cheated, we've done something VERY bad, and if other people find out about it, we will be rejected in some way or another, to some degree or another. And I will tell you that a lot of people buy into this kind of thinking, but also don't really acknowledge that. So, for example, people will sometimes tell me something like, "If people find out about what I've been doing, I'm totally afraid everyone I know will hate me or distance themselves from me, or think really badly of me... but I know that's not REALLY what's going to happen." Here's the thing, people: you may intellectually know that it's unlikely that literally everyone you know will truly hate you if your infidelity becomes known. But you may also, simultaneously, be truly afraid that something like this could happen. And if that's the case, that's fair, and it's important to acknowledge this fear, rather than trying to pretend it doesn't exist.



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The problem isn't the fear we feel, it's how we try to handle it. So often, we try to deal with our fears of what other people might think by attempting to manage what they might think, through managing what we tell them about our situation, or don't tell them about our situation. And when we attempt to do this, we create a prison for ourselves. We don't become prisoners of what other people think. We become prisoners of what we IMAGINE other people might think, and what we think their thoughts about us would do to us, or mean for us.

Do we really want to do that to ourselves?

I want to suggest that instead of worrying about what other people are going to think, and how we can best manage their impressions of us by carefully managing the information we share or don't share, we are better served by deciding what we are going to believe about ourselves no matter what.

For instance, if we believe that life gets a little complicated, and a little messy sometimes, but that's okay, we may feel a lot better about our infidelity situation than we may feel if we believe that everything has to turn out in a particular way in order for everything and everyone to be all right. If we believe that it's okay if we aren't unassailable, if we believe that it's possible for other people to disapprove of us without us spontaneously combusting, then we can exist in the world very differently than we can if we believe that our very existence depends on us doing everything right, and on everyone thinking that we've done everything right.

If we believe that we are fundamentally worthy of love and understanding and acceptance and belonging, the stakes of telling the story of our



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relationship that began in the context of infidelity are different than if we believe our worthiness is contingent upon our “good behavior.”

There's this idea that in our defenselessness, our safety lies. In our defenselessness, our safety lies. Sometimes this idea is attributed to the work called A Course In Miracles, but it might have older origins. I bet it does. Anyway, the idea is that when we cease to believe that we have something to guard against, we can truly find the sense of freedom and safety we desire.

And so often, when we're trying to figure out what to tell people about our relationship that began in the context of an infidelity situation, this is what essentially seems to be at stake. If we constantly have to figure out what truths we can or should tell, or what we “need” to lie about, we're probably going to feel quite un-free, and perhaps un-safe. Similarly, if we're afraid that other people are going to judge us and reject us if they know the truth of our lives, we're probably not going to feel very safe or free.

If we can love ourselves enough to not need to defend ourselves from others, we're off the hook, in a sense. We can feel safe and free, no matter what we choose to tell people or not tell people, and no matter what their reactions are to whatever we tell them or don't tell them.

Now you may be listening to this and thinking, okay, all of this is very nice, but what do I actually have to tell people about my relationship? How much of the infidelity stuff do I have to explain? People are going to want to know, aren't they? Just tell me what details I have to share, and which I can keep to myself!

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Here's the thing, people. The answers to those questions are always specific to you and your unique situation, and your unique priorities. Sometimes people really want to be as honest as possible, but disclose as little as possible. Sometimes people do not want to reveal certain pieces of information, even if that means they tell blatant lies, over and over again. Sometimes people want to tell the whole story, and all of the imaginable details. Sometimes, a lot of the details of our situation are made public without us having a say in it. And there's no one-size-fits-all formula for dealing with this. However, I can help you decide how you want to handle the sharing of information about your specific situation.

But the underlying beliefs you bring to making the decisions about what you tell people or don't tell people about your relationship are the starting point I want you to be concerned with. Our operating assumptions really matter, so taking those into consideration is an essential first step.

So remember: you don't have to tell anyone anything. You never do. Sometimes we think that people NEED to know certain details, but that may not be as true as we think it is. Other people may want information from us, but that doesn't mean it's incumbent upon us to meet their demands. Humans may love to get super involved in other humans' drama, but that doesn't mean that you have to supply it.

And you also get to remember that you get to tell the story of your life that feels the most life-affirming to tell. You may WANT to acknowledge the origins of your relationship. You may want to say, you know what, this relationship had complicated beginnings. We took responsibility for our actions as best as we could. Life doesn't have to go exactly as we expect it will for everyone to be okay, in the greater scheme of things. We don't have to have this perfect, unassailable life to take pride in who we are. We

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can be proud of the love we share with another person, even if that love began in a way it wasn't "supposed to."

I firmly believe that we are all entitled to as much privacy as we want. We can share as much or as little of ourselves as we want to. We aren't obligated to satisfy anyone else's curiosity. However, I think it's also so important to recognize how much power there can be in sharing out stories with others. Our stories of ourselves can be great sources of meaning, and pride, and can help us create a sense of identity and belonging. And there may be times when find great value in sharing truths of your life experiences with others, even if it's scary to do so.

That's your call to make. But there's one last thing I want to say about the power of accepting your own infidelity situation, and owning that story of your life. When you're able to do that, and if you then choose to share that story with others, you a) may find that your experience is a lot more relatable and a less unique than you thought it was, and you may find that there's so much more empathy and support for you than you thought there was, and b) you may show others that it's okay to not be perfect, so to speak. By being willing the share the fullness of our humanity with others, we show others that it is possible for them to do the same. And the impact of this can profound, no matter who you choose to share the details of your infidelity situation with, or what details you choose to share.

And if you've made it this far and you're still thinking, "Fine, great, but how do I explain my situation to my kids?" Or what do I say to this specific person, or that specific person? I can help you decide what you want to say, and how you want to say it. I can help you get clear on what information you want to share, and what you might not want to share. If you want to talk about that, you can schedule an introductory coaching session with me through my website, [mariemurphyphd.com](http://mariemurphyphd.com). And of

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course, I'm here to help you sort out any other aspects of your infidelity situation in a way that's truly right for you.

Thank you all so much for listening. Have an amazing week! Bye for now.