

SHEKNOWS Parenting

Kids coping with infidelity

Vicki Salemi

What happens when your man has a lady friend, and you have little ones to raise? What if you *gasp* suspect your man is cheating? Better yet, what if he's not physically cheating but is emotionally connecting with another woman? Marriage experts share the best way to manage marital problems when kids are involved.



Megan Norris, certified marriage and family therapist and clinical director of Pittsburgh-based Relationship Resolutions, says a few warning signs may help you determine if your spouse has a wandering eye. The top giveaways: Your spouse is unusually distant; spends excessive amounts of time on the computer or talking/texting on the phone; is spending more money than usual; seems more focused on his appearance; and is no longer interested in sex.

HOW TO CONFRONT YOUR SPOUSE

Find a time and place where you can talk -- without the kids around. "To address suspicions, don't accuse," Norris says. "Do be curious. Start by noting observations about the change in behaviors. Ask him what his thoughts are on the changes; has he noticed them? Next, clearly explain your concerns in a gentle, non-threatening way. Last, state your needs, and ask him if he is willing to try and work with you on improving the relationship. Practice what you are going to say ahead of time. Being prepared will help you stay calm and focused."

THE REASONS BEHIND CHEATING

Marilyn Barnicke Belleghem, M.Ed., a registered marriage and family therapist and author of *Questing Marilyn: In Search of My Holy Grail, Personal Growth Through Travel*, suspected her husband was cheating on her based on his facial expressions when the other woman was around. The woman was married to one of his law partners. "We saw them a lot and couldn't really avoid them," she says. "I confronted my husband directly, but he accused me of being jealous, making up stories and, in general, did what I now know cheaters do: Attack the accuser and undermine her confidence in her own perceptions."

Fortunately for Marilyn, who is now celebrating her 10th wedding anniversary with an honest, straightforward man, her professional training helped her understand her marriage difficulties. "I changed from the insecure 15-year-old girl repeating my first year of high school to a confident, well educated woman with a lot of opportunities and a strong social and professional network. This helped me see that he wanted a wife he had more control over and who wouldn't upset his career plans to become a judge. I believe he groomed the other woman to idolize him like I had as a young girl."

KEEP CHILDREN A PRIORITY

Keep in mind that infidelity doesn't apply to cheating husbands. Kent "The Deck Chef" Whitaker, author of the *Tennessee Hometown Cookbook*, was shocked and stunned when he found love notes hidden in his bedroom from a guy to his wife. Kent attempted to get his ex-wife to attend therapy, to which she never agreed (or agreed and then just didn't

commit).

He explains, "I did end up talking to a few people, but it was senseless to me without her. I guess it helped me realize that I needed to be there for my son every moment that I could." Kent's son was between 10 and 15 years old during most of those years. "He is now ARMY strong, in officers' school with a complete scholarship. Everyone tells me that he is just like me: Open, never met a stranger, always opens doors for a lady, etc., and he seems to hit it off with our friends' parents. I think I made the right choice to be with him every second I could."

A POSITIVE OUTCOME IS POSSIBLE

Charles Orlando, relationship coach and author of *The Problem with Women is... Men*, reminds us, "A good relationship takes effort." While he says there are different types of cheating, such as mentally or physically, one of the biggest problems in relationships is communicating. "It doesn't mean always talking. It means active listening."

With kids in the picture, he emphasizes that they pick up on cues. "Kids are bright; they adapt and definitely see what's going on around them." It's important to build trust again. While each situation is very different, he says, ultimately, there are two options: Decide to work together to fix the broken relationship, or leave it altogether.

If you decide to work on it, Norris notes that the difficulties could be a springboard for growth in the relationship. "Infidelity doesn't have to lead to divorce. Sometimes, with time and effort, infidelity can end up being a real opportunity for growth and change because it can force a couple to make changes that were needed long before. This is the most positive outcome for kids. One of the greatest gifts we can give our children is showing them by example not to be afraid of painful experiences, but to engage fully in the process of self-exploration, perseverance, patience and commitment."