



## Crossing The Line: When Does Infidelity Begin?

by Tim Tedder

Podcast Outline: [The Recovery Room, Episode #213](#)

### Introduction

When does an affair start? What boundary marks the crossing over from fidelity to infidelity? Where would you draw that line? Sex? Romantic interactions? Telling a lie? We'll consider those questions as we examine two different affairs in an attempt to understand where the line was crossed.

### Defining Affairs & Infidelity

1. Infidelity = breaking an intimate trust, not necessarily an affair
  - a. Pornography
  - b. Private Obsession
  - c. One-Sided Pursuit
2. Affair = infidelity that leads to a relationship
3. Both are a violation of the promises we make in marriage. Both break the trust that is the foundation of any secure, intimate relationship.

### A Series of Steps Crossing Many Lines

1. The move from faithfulness to unfaithfulness rarely happens in one big leap. The path to infidelity is usually a winding one. When a person first steps on it, they usually don't see where the path eventually ends, but the first step onto the winding path leads to the next until they, eventually, end up in a place they didn't originally intend to go. Once there, they often decide to stay, at least for a while
2. Quotes from [Mistakes Were Made \(But Not By Me\)](#) by Carol Travis

*"How do you get an honest man to lose his ethical compass? You get him to take one step at a time, and self-justification will do the rest."*

*“Ordinary people can end up doing immoral and harmful things through a chain reaction of behavior and subsequent self-justification. When we, as observers, look at them in puzzlement or dismay, we fail to realize that we are often looking at the end of a long, slow process... When we cross these lines, we are justifying behavior that we know is wrong precisely so that we can continue to see ourselves as honest people and not criminals or thieves.”*

*“Cognitive dissonance is a state of tension that occurs whenever a person holds two cognitions (ideas, attitudes, beliefs, opinions) that are psychologically inconsistent. People strive to make sense out of contradictory ideas and lead lives that are, at least in their own minds, consistent and meaningful.”*

## 2 Personal Stories

### 1. Tim's Story

- a. How did I get from wedding vows to secret obsession? What was the progression of compromise? Working backwards, from the end to the beginning...
  - i. Devotion: I gave another woman the focus of my intimate attention (emotional and sexual) in an ongoing relationship
  - ii. Sex: The first encounter involving “bedroom behavior”
  - iii. Secret Plans: Cooperating privately to spend more time together
  - iv. Physical Affection: The first hug & kiss
  - v. Private Conversations: Expressing mutual feelings for each other
  - vi. The Masked Invitation: “We need to be careful.”
  - vii. Hidden Attraction: An inner awareness of growing interest that remains undisclosed
  - viii. Compromised Thoughts
    1. Comparing my wife to other women (critical of the familiar negatives; attracted to the perceived positives).
    2. Investing emotional energy in friendships with other women rather than in my marriage.
- b. The Common Ingredient: Secrecy

*“One ethics teacher I took a class from talked about the ‘Well-Lit Room Test.’ If you were caught by someone with a bright light on this relationship and your spouse was looking or listening in on your conversation or behavior, how would that be interpreted by the spouse?” -Interview with Linda McDonald ([Recovery Room podcast #122](#))*
- c. The Progression of Justifications
  - i. Compromised Thoughts: They're just thoughts; I won't *do anything*. (The root of my infidelity was my failure to move vulnerably into my marriage and, instead, think that a more satisfying intimacy would be experienced if I were free to pursue any other particular attraction.)

- ii. Cultivated Attraction: Time spent with her makes me happy. It's good to feel happy with so many disappointments and difficulties in my life. I'm not doing anything wrong; nobody's getting hurt.
- iii. Masked Invitation: It think she feels attracted to me, too. It would be nice to know somebody really thinks about me that way. We don't have to do anything about it, but I just want to know.
- iv. Private Conversations: It feels good to say it. It feels good to hear it. This is what's missing from my marriage. Isn't it what everybody wants? We don't have to do anything about it, but it's satisfying to talk about "what if"?
- v. Physical Affection: It's natural to show affection to someone you feel so strongly about. What's the harm in a hug or kiss if you don't let it go any further than that? Nobody else will ever know, anyway.
- vi. Secret Plans: I don't want to give up something that feels so satisfying. I love the time I get to spend with her. We're not going to lose our marriages over this, but our connection is just too special to let go of right now. Why not enjoy it for a while? I can do this and still be a good husband and father.
- vii. Sex: Maybe we shouldn't do it, but how can we not? We're falling in love with each other and it just feels like the next natural step. I want to know what it's like to be with her completely. We'll only do it once and nobody else will ever know.
- viii. Devotion: How can you control love? Our connection is so easy and natural; it feels like we were always meant to be together. Isn't it better to be happy than to be bound by duty or obligation that feels so miserable? This isn't just something I want, it's something I deserve.

## 2. "Amanda's" Story

As another example of crossing lines, Amanda shares her story of progression from a wife who never thought she would be unfaithful, to a woman involved in an affair relationship. In the context of a marriage that had become disconnected, she began making small choices that changed her course. Now, on the other side of the affair, she talks about what happened and what she's learning.

## Conclusions

### 1. To the Unfaithful Spouse

- a. Active Affair: Recognize & Disclose
- b. Ended Affair: Focus on the Truth (to your spouse, to yourself)

### 2. To the Betrayed Spouse

- a. Active Affair: What your wayward spouse says about the affair and your marriage is likely motivated by self-justification, not truthfulness.
- b. Ended Affair: To understand the affair, avoid the search for a single explanation for the ultimate outcome. Instead, recognize the series of compromises and justifications that

led them there. If you choose to work on repairing your marriage, you will eventually need to hear clear answers to these questions:

- i. What were the choices that betrayed your promises to me? How did they progress? How did you justify them?
- ii. Do you think differently about those choices and justifications now? If so, how?
- iii. What gives you (and me) the assurance that you won't do this again?

3. To Couples: Rebuilding intimacy and trust also comes in a series of steps.

A quote from [Affair Healing: A Recovery Guide for Couples](#)

*“Reaching connection in your marriage isn’t like crossing a line at the end of the race. Healing spouses who are disconnected one moment don’t suddenly discover they have “arrived” back to intimacy again. The experience is more like moving toward the center of concentric stages...*

*“You will have occasions of connection before it becomes the norm in your marriage again... You’ve probably already experienced encounters that stirred a familiar longing for closeness. Maybe you’ve stepped cautiously in and out of these connecting moments, but eventually you need to move purposefully into them so that Connection once again becomes the place where your marriage rests.”*

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