

Ep #103: Dealing with a Vindictive Affair Partner



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Dr. Marie Murphy

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Okay! Today we are going to talk about dealing with a vindictive affair partner.

Sometimes, two people will be having an affair, and one member of the affair couple will want to end the relationship, but will hesitate, because they're afraid that if they do, their affair partner will tell on them. Meaning, they think their affair partner will call their spouse, if they have one, and tell them everything. Or engage in a full-on defamation campaign by taking out a full-page ad in a major newspaper that proclaims them to be a philanderer - or whatever the modern-day equivalent is. Some people are afraid that their affair partner will share photos or videos of them that they have in their digital possession. And the fear of their affair partner doing any of these things, or exposing the secret and illicit relationship in some way, keeps them in the relationship, or at least, serves as a handy excuse for not ending the relationship.

Here's the thing, people. Humans be doing some crazy shit. Or, to put it in slightly different terms, as humans, we have the capacity to experience very intensely uncomfortable emotions, and since nobody teaches us how to deal with those excruciatingly unpleasant emotions, we often do some pretty crazy things when we feel them. Something happens and we don't like it, and then we feel an intensely uncomfortable emotion that we don't know how to handle, so we REACT in some way or another. We try to get rid of the feeling, or we try to resolve the situation that we think caused the feeling, or we just have some sort of freak out before we even know what has hit us. At times, the actions we take from a state of intense discomfort may seem perfectly reasonable to us in retrospect. But at other times, we may do things in our state of extreme discomfort that we look back upon with dismay.

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Now, here's the really important point. I want to suggest that many, if not most, if not ALL of us have done things, from a state of excruciating emotional discomfort, that we are not proud of, in retrospect. I certainly have! And I bet you have too.

And right off the bat, I want to suggest that this is a very human thing to do. We may not like it when we do things that we cringe when we look back upon, and we may not like it when other people do things from their states of extreme discomfort that we don't like. But what if this is a totally normal part of the human experience? What if it doesn't mean there's anything wrong with us, or with anybody else? What if it's just a Thing that we sometimes behave in strange ways when we're feeling really uncomfortable?

Now, I'm not suggesting that this is the end of the story. I'm not suggesting that there aren't consequences to the ways we behave when we're in pain, and that we shouldn't try to take responsibility for our actions. But we can do that from a place of understanding that when we are in pain, we tend to act in ways that end up perpetuating our own pain, AND occasioning pain for others. When people do things we don't like, we often make that mean that they are a Bad Person. And we apply this thinking to ourselves, as well. But what if it's not a matter of people being bad when they do crazy stuff at all? What if it's just a reflection of them being in a state of extreme discomfort? Ever heard the expression "people are assholes because they suffer"? You may have heard me say that on this podcast before. When we can think about other people's behavior this way, instead of thinking

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that people behave like assholes because there's something wrong with them, difficult situations with other people can be a little less difficult.

And to that effect, I'm going to take us on a very important tangent. One of the most basic reasons why I do the work I do is to contribute to the reduction of unnecessary suffering we humans impose upon ourselves and others. To help reduce the burden of suffering for my individual clients, and everyone they come into contact with, and then, subsequently, everyone THOSE people come into contact with.

Pain and discomfort may be inevitable parts of the human experience, but when we can learn to deal with our discomfort differently, we can eliminate unnecessary suffering. As the saying goes, pain is inevitable, but suffering is optional. When we learn how to create less suffering for ourselves, we can participate in our relationships in different ways. We can do fewer things that end up creating suffering for others. And the net effect of this is that we contribute to peace, in all its forms, in our individual lives, and in the world as a whole. One of the great ironies of human existence is that we often try to fix the problems we perceive in the world by doing things for other people, or TO other people. When we think something is wrong, we try to get external circumstances to change. But I want to suggest that every change we wish to see in the world begins with making change within ourselves. That does not mean that we gaze at our navels all day long and get drunk on the kool aid of self-improvement. It means we learn how to effectively take responsibility for our own shit, instead of imposing all of our undigested garbage onto other people, inadvertently or otherwise. As I talked about a few episodes back, the whole point of dealing with your infidelity situation in a way that you feel good about is to eliminate unnecessary clutter from your life, so that you can show up in the world as

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the fullest, most evolved expression of who you are. This way, you can become a part of solutions in your life and in the world, instead of contributing to problems.

Now I'm about to say something that might sound like a contradiction, but isn't. While I suggest that there is great value in striving for evolution, individually and collectively, I also want to suggest that there is great value in recognizing that there are times, within our experience of life, that we may get totally stuck in our own shit. We, at times, are totally stuck in our own pain and fear and ignorance and unwillingness to do anything about it other than rage at the world or attempt to other people make as bad as we feel.

I do not encourage indulging in this kind of behavior. But I don't encourage rejecting it, either. There's a difference between not indulging suffering, whether it's ours or someone else's, and not allowing it to be a part of the human condition. We may not want to stay stuck forever, but that doesn't mean we aren't allowed to get stuck. We may not want to sit in our dirty diaper forever, but that doesn't mean we're a terrible person if we poop in our pants. I mean that metaphorically, but of course it's also true in the more literal sense. Sometimes we poop in our pants! And there's an important balance to be struck between allowing ourselves – and others – to be confused humans, who sometimes get stuck in their own shit, and knowing when to step up and take responsibility for making change.

Now I'm going to go off on a tangent from my original tangent – but I promise that this is all going somewhere. I haven't lost my own train of

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thought. Here's the sub-tangent: a hundred and fifty years ago, when I was an undergraduate, I studied abroad, and the application process for doing this included an interview with a whole panel of interviewers. And one of the interview questions was, "Can you tell us about one of your faults?" I remember being asked that question like it was yesterday, and I answered the question immediately, and I remember exactly how I answered the question. But, for the sake of keeping this tangent SOMEWHAT contained, I'm not going to tell you what my answer was. What I want to tell you instead is this. The year after I studied abroad, I worked in the study abroad office, and I was then part of the team who interviewed study abroad applicants, and we of course asked applicants the same question: can you tell us about one of your faults? And what blew me away was how hard it was for so many people to answer that question. I remember CLEARLY how one applicant seemed shocked and maybe even insulted by the question, and then proceeded to say, "Faults? I don't think I have any faults." One of the interviewers very gently prodded him to think about maybe some little imperfection that he might be aware of, but he couldn't produce anything. And the interview team didn't let it go. We kept asking the question in different ways, and he just couldn't answer, and ultimately we suggested to him that perhaps he might be just somewhat deficient in self-awareness. And I think we said this fairly nicely, all things considered.

I'm telling you this story for two reasons. The first is, a lot of us find it pretty painful to recognize ourselves as human, as imperfect, as messy, as flawed. And there are a lot of reasons why this can be the case, starting with the fact that so many of us are taught, implicitly and explicitly, starting from the time we are very young, that if we aren't perfect, we're totally doomed. So it can be really scary and threatening to acknowledge our so-called faults. And that's the second reason why I've told you this story. What if our faults aren't really faults? What if the study abroad interviewee I just told you about was RIGHT? What if we didn't have to think about the

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features of our unique humanity as strengths OR weakness, or faults OR virtues? And even if we did want to retain the idea of faults, what if having faults is just part of being human?

To conclude both the tangent-within-a-tangent, AND my original tangent, I want to suggest that the more accepting we can be of ourselves, and our various features, including the ones that might be considered faults, the more compassionate we can be towards ourselves AND OTHERS. If we're willing to be aware of ourselves and accepting of all parts ourselves, including our so-called faults, we can suffer less. And when we're suffering less, it's a little easier to tolerate the humanity of others. When we're able to allow ourselves to be imperfect without considering ourselves Bad, it's a lot easier to deal with other humans' imperfect behavior without letting it get the best of us.

Now, this doesn't mean we don't set boundaries. Tolerating the humanity of others doesn't mean that we allow anything and everything in our lives. If people are doing things that we don't want to be a part of, we have every right to walk away. But there's a difference between doing this from a place of believing that someone else's behavior is awful and they are Bad, and believing that we all have the capacity to behave in some pretty strange ways when we're feeling intense feelings that we don't know how to deal with.

All of this can be really important to keep in mind if we're afraid that the person we're cheating with will go nuclear on us if we break up with them. People do go nuclear sometimes. It DOES happen. And given that we

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cannot predict the future with absolute certainty, we may not know how reasonable it is for us to be concerned about having our affair partner go nuclear on us, should we decide to end our relationship with them.

So, with everything I've just said as context, we're going to talk about how you can handle your concern that your affair partner might have a meltdown if you break up with them, and potentially do something like call your spouse, or post naked photos of you online, or do whatever it is you're afraid they might do. My guidance is going to be all about managing your OWN thinking, your own emotions, and your own behavior, because that's where your power lies. Your power lies in taking responsibility for the things you can actually control, NOT in attempting to control things that you really can't control – like other people and whatever they do or don't do.

Here are my seven pieces of guidance.

ONE:

If you're concerned that your affair partner is going to do some stuff that you don't want them to do if you break up with them, I want you to start off by getting really clear on what you think they will do, and why you think they will do it. I want you to be SPECIFIC about this. What EXACTLY do you think your affair partner is going to do, and why EXACTLY do you think they will do that thing, or those things?

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Here's why it's important to do this. Our brains LOVE to entertain scary scenarios, and totally freak out about terrifying possibilities. This has had some evolutionary function: our big fancy brains evolved to protect us from danger, and that has helped humans deal with threats and dangers, and survive and evolve. But the kinds of threats humans are exposed to have evolved more quickly than our brains have. So, thinking that your affair partner might call your spouse and tell on you if you break up with them might SEEM like an existential threat that you have to take very, very seriously, and totally panic about. Your brain may THINK that this supposed threat is the same as a bear coming after you. But it really isn't.

So, what are you afraid your affair partner might do, and why are you afraid of this? You may find that you have very specific fears, for very specific reasons. Sometimes people tell me that they're afraid that their affair partner will expose them if they break up with them, because their affair partner has explicitly threatened to do exactly that. Perhaps even repeatedly! But on the other hand, sometimes people tell me that they're afraid their affair partner will publicly humiliate them if they break up with them because this happened to a friend of a friend of theirs once, or they read about it happening on the internet somewhere, or they saw a meme about it, but they don't actually think their affair partner would do this kind of thing. They've just decided that if other people have had this experience, maybe they will too.

Once you have identified your concerns, ask yourself how likely you think it is that they will be realized. Maybe, upon thinking about it from a reasonably calm and neutral place, you decide that you're really not all that

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concerned that your affair partner will go nuclear on you. Maybe, once you take a close look at your concerns, you think you're just anxious about your situation in general, but you're not actually all that concerned about what your affair partner might do if you ended the relationship.

TWO:

Once you have clarified what you're concerned about, WHY you're concerned about it, and how likely you think it is that your concerns will be realized, your job is to recognize that your fear or anxiety or whatever it is you're feeling is coming from YOU. If you're worried that your affair partner will freak out and call your spouse if you break up with them, and that hasn't actually happened yet, it is your thinking and only your thinking that is generating your fear.

It's your job to recognize this, and recognize that you have the power to feed your fear, or reduce your fears through your thinking. If you have decided that you believe that the likelihood of your affair partner doing anything to expose your relationship if you were to break up with them is probably pretty low, then you can remind yourself of that. Often. And this will help you feel more calm, and if you feel more calm, you are in a better position to take action.

Now, if you have decided that you have good reason to suspect that your affair partner might do something quite rash if you break up with them, your

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job may lie in being willing to relate to the emotion of fear in a different way. No matter how scary a future possibility may seem, we have the power to relate to our fear more consciously, so that it doesn't stop us in our tracks.

THREE:

Once you have done the first two things I've recommended, it's time to think about what you might DO in your situation. Let's say you're pretty sure you want to end your relationship with your affair partner, but you've been holding back because you're afraid they'll freak out and do something rash, and you think you have pretty good reasons for thinking they might expose your secret relationship. From a place of relative calm, you can begin to strategize. What could you do that might lessen the chances of your undesired outcome being realized?

Here's an example. Let's say you've been making promises to your affair partner about having a shared future with them, and they've been getting really excited about a future with you, and they've been starting to plan their life around promises you've made. You might want to start scaling back on the promises. You might want to sit them down and tell them that you need more time before you can commit to the shared future you've been promising them. You might want to tell them that you feel really badly about saying all of this, but you want them to know that you're not as sure about the future of your relationship as you used to be. Doing this might be uncomfortable for you, but it might be a way to begin to be more honest with your affair partner, and thus potentially help them start to recalibrate their expectations. For some people, receiving the message that plans

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might be changing can be very unwelcome, but it can be a lot less rage-inspiring than being ghosted, or being abruptly broken up with.

This of course can also be an important cautionary message, even if you aren't considering breaking up with your affair partner and fearing they may go ballistic. In affair situations, there can be a strong temptation to make big plans for the future, or make grand promises about what you're going to do in the future, but it may be worth putting the brakes on these kinds of tendencies. When we make promises that we aren't yet sure we will be able to keep, we may end up creating a lot of unnecessary trouble for ourselves!

It may be hard to keep the desire to make promises to our affair partner in check, of course. But committing to things we aren't yet in a position to deliver on can stir up trouble in affairs, because the person you're making promises to may believe you, and may also believe that you are obligated to do whatever you've promised to do.

That takes us to point number FOUR.

You are of course allowed to change your mind, and to retract promises you've made to your affair partner. Of course you are. But it's also really important to remember that your affair partner may not like this AT ALL. They may have believed every single word that's ever come out of your mouth, and they may have taken all of your promises seriously and literally,

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and they may not have even considered the possibility that you might not do every single thing that you've told them you would.

And so, if you abruptly break up with them after telling them for weeks on end that they're the love of your life and you can't wait to leave your spouse so that you can be with them, they may be rather upset.

And if they are, whether or not they **SHOULD** be upset does not matter. Whether or not they are expressing their hurt or anger in a manner you consider appropriate is beside the point. You get to be human and break promises that you've made. And they get to be human in their reaction to that. And their human reaction may be pretty big, shall we say.

And here's what I want to suggest to you. You can honor – or tolerate – both your own humanity and theirs in a moment like this. You can allow yourself to be the person who made promises and then broke them. And you can allow your affair partner to be the person who is very upset about that. Without making that mean that **EITHER** of you are bad people. And you can care about how they're feeling, while also holding your ground.

You can continue to extend love to them, without capitulating to what they might want. They may think you owe it to them to do whatever you've promised you'll do, because you promised, damnit. They might have a

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whole list of reasons why they literally will not be able to live if you don't stay with them forever and do whatever you promised them you'd do – and they may share these reasons with you in very dramatic fashion. They may scream and cry and threaten. They may beg and wail and berate you. And if they are behaving in a manner you consider extreme or unpleasant or extremely unpleasant, you may want to get as far the hell away from them as possible, as quickly as possible. And of course it is your right to do this, and if you are concerned for your physical safety, then by all means, do what you need to do to protect yourself.

But a lot of the time, in situations like this, our concerns aren't really about our physical safety. They're about our own emotional discomfort. For a lot of us, it's pretty uncomfortable to promise someone something and then say no, I'm not going to do that. For a lot of us, it's pretty painful to truly believe that we want to have a future with someone, and tell them so, and enjoy making plans with that person – only to later realize that we don't actually want to do that at all, and to have to communicate that to the person we've made all of these promises to. And for a lot of us, it's pretty uncomfortable to have someone we care about – or HAVE cared about – tell us that we've hurt them, or they're really angry at us, or they're going to make our lives a living hell.

So if you deliver some news that your affair partner doesn't like, you may want to give them a moment to blow off steam without YOU freaking out and running away. In other words, you may want to be present with them and all of their messy emotions, even though it may be really uncomfortable for you to do this.

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You may also want to apologize for changing your mind. I'm not saying you have to, especially if you don't mean it, but it might be a helpful thing for you to say, if it's true. You may want to tell them that you're so sorry that they're hurting. You may want to ask them if there's anything you can do that will help them feel supported – within reason, of course.

Now, will doing any of this guarantee that your person will not go nuclear and call your spouse and tell on you, or whatever? No, it's not a GUARANTEE. But, to put it in really transactional terms, it may be an insurance policy of sorts. When another human is hurting, and they think you're the cause of their pain, and you stay there with them in their pain and acknowledge their hurt, they may like this a lot better than you taking off on them as soon as you see that they're hurting. And as a result, they may be less inclined to try and inflict pain and suffering on you, or less inclined to seek revenge and get back at you. This isn't true of EVERYONE, of course, but it's definitely true of some people: if someone hurts us in a way we consider reasonably considerate, we can accept it and move on. But if someone hurts us in a way we consider callous or excessively insensitive, we may be pissed, and we may feel completely justified in exacting some sort of revenge.

To that point, I'm going to share what may be a very old statistic, but I remember hearing a long time ago that the biggest factor in whether patients decided to sue their doctors who committed some sort of medical error for malpractice is whether or not the doctor apologized. Physicians, please forgive me if my facts are out of date or if this was more of a story than a fact. But just for now, let's assume this is accurate, and consider the implications of this. If the doctor who makes a mistake apologizes, the patient is much less likely to sue for malpractice. What if that were true in

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other situations, as well? What if what we ultimately want, when someone has hurt us in some way, is just a basic acknowledgment of what we're going through, and a simple apology?

We're all humans, and we're all going to do things that other humans don't like. And instead of fearing how people are going to react to us when we do something they don't like, we might do well to brave their reaction, and be with them in our shared humanity as they experience their discomfort, and we experience ours. This certainly takes courage! But that doesn't have to be a problem.

So, what that might mean for you and your affair partner is that it may be a lot more fun to make grand plans for the future with someone than to break up with someone and then sit with them while they're howling at you and blaming you for breaking their heart and ruining their life. But if you care about someone enough to make grand plans for the future with them, perhaps you just might care about them enough to sit there and be with them as they have a bit of a meltdown if you break up with them or retract the promises you've made to them.

Sometimes all we really want is to believe that another human out there understands that we're hurting, and cares that we're hurting. Believing that others have sympathy for what we're going through can defuse a LOT of anger that we may feel if we think that other people don't see or understand or care about our pain. So being willing to show your affair partner that you care about what they're feeling may be the difference between them feeling awful and maybe thinking that you're a jerk but that they can move on, and

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them feeling awful and believing that the best way for them to feel better is to try to make you feel awful, too. Remember: people are assholes because they suffer. If you can help someone suffer a little less, they may engage in less asshole behavior.

NOW, let me just be absolutely clear that this is not some sort of magic guarantee that if you do or don't do certain things, your affair partner will not do the things you're afraid they might do. But in general, compassion begets compassion. Try it and see.

FIVE:

I am all in favor of people having very frank discussions with their affair partners about what the boundaries and protocols within their relationships are. Some affair couples have agreements about keeping their relationship a secret no matter what, and totally trust that their affair partner will always honor the agreement, no matter what, and sometimes that's exactly what happens. So that's something you might want to consider implementing in your own affair relationship if you are at a point in your relationship where that makes sense.

But it's also the case that sometimes promises are not kept. Sometimes an affair couple has sworn that they would never tell anyone about their secret relationship, no matter what, but then one person ends the relationship in a way the other person doesn't like, and then all bets are off, and despite

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your efforts to prevent this from happening, the situation becomes very volatile. If this happens, and you're the person who's breaking up with your affair partner who once promised to never reveal your relationship to anyone but is now threatening to reveal it to EVERYONE, I encourage you to attend to your partner's hurt – RATHER than attempting to remind them that they made a promise, damnit, and they'd really better keep it. Though it may be TRUE that they made a promise, attempting to pressure them to keep it because you are terrified of what might happen if they don't may simply add fuel to their fire.

SIX:

Depending on the specifics of your unique situation, it may be entirely appropriate to simply ask your affair partner not to do whatever it is you're afraid they're going to do. If they're threatening to call your spouse and tell them everything, it may make a lot of sense to simply say, "Please don't do that." Sometimes people get really worked up and agitated and either say things they really don't mean, or start talking about doing things that they really haven't thought through. When emotion is high, intelligence is low. In addition to being present with your affair partner instead of running away if they're feeling upset, you are totally within your rights to say, "I know you're upset right now. But I am asking you not to do..." whatever it is they may be threatening to do.

In addition, you can also tell someone what they can expect from you if they behave in certain ways. If someone tells you that they're going to set your car on fire if you break up with them, you can calmly explain that if

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they do that, you will report them to the relevant authorities – IF you plan to actually do that, of course. But the point isn't to get into a situation where you and your affair partner are trading threats. The point is to de-escalate the situation, by being as calm and reasonable as you can be.

To that effect, I encourage you to keep in mind that if you think your affair partner is highly emotional and behaving unreasonably, you may well be in a state of heightened emotion yourself. If they are threatening to call your spouse or slash your tires or something along those lines, it is entirely possible that they are very emotionally agitated indeed.

And it might seem like THAT is your problem to fix. But your actual job is to attend to your own emotional agitation. See if you can be aware of and responsible for your response to whatever they are doing or saying, rather than trying to get them to change anything they're doing right away. If you want to be a lion tamer, you have to be a grounded badass. You have to be calm and assertive. You may be dealing with a wounded animal who isn't thinking clearly. If you're going to rein in the situation, you cannot do so by bringing your own emotional chaos into the mix.

SEVEN:

This might sound strange, but if you're worried about your affair partner going nuclear on you, I want you to consider the worst possible thing that might happen. Let's say that you have attempted to break up with your

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affair partner in a really gentle, considerate way, and they're still really upset, and they are making explicit threats to expose your relationship and you have no idea what to do, OTHER THAN entertain catastrophic scenarios and freak out.

Indulging in freaking out about worst-case scenarios is unlikely to help you.

However, there may be great benefit in acknowledging your worst fears, instead of avoiding them or indulging them, and then actually considering what you would do if this worst-case scenario were to arise.

So often we think about terrible things that might happen to us and we imagine that we would be COMPLETELY POWERLESS in such situations. But is that ever true? And is this kind of thinking ever helpful? My answer to both of those questions is no. And given that, I think that sometimes it CAN be useful to allow ourselves to consider whatever our worst-case scenario is, IF WE THEN THINK POWERFULLY ABOUT WHAT WE WOULD ACTUALLY DO TO HANDLE THE SITUATION IF IT WERE TO OCCUR. So let's say your fear is that your affair partner will freak out upon you breaking up with them, and show up at your home in the middle of the night and accost your spouse and children and tell them everything and set your car on fire and wake up all of your neighbors while they're at it.

I don't wish that upon you, of course. Nor am I making light of such a possibility. But if this is a concern of yours, do you want to remain

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paralyzed in fear that it might happen, or do you want to think about how you would actually handle it if it did? Because I will tell you this. No matter how unpleasant it might be if that did happen, you could handle it, one piece at a time, one way or another, and you would survive. And thinking about how you could best handle such a situation, should it occur, can **HELP YOU FEEL BETTER NOW**. On the other hand, if you explicitly or implicitly believe that if something like this were to happen, it would just be terrible and there wouldn't be anything you could do to make it any less so, you are going to feel pretty bad right now. And this is before the dreaded scenario has even happened!

I want you to consider that you can **DECIDE** that you are going to be okay no matter what, and that you can make it so. I want you to consider that even if your affair partner went ballistic and showed up at your home and your place of work and told everyone you care about every single detail of what you've been up to, you would survive. You might not want this turn of events to ever transpire, but you can choose to believe that you would survive if it did. And this is very important, because it will help you avoid getting sucked into a vortex of panic and the paralysis that comes with that.

TWO LAST POINTS:

We don't have to preemptively make ourselves the victim of other people's imagined bad behavior. We don't have to hold ourselves hostage to what we're afraid other people might do, or not do. Why would you want to give events that haven't even happened yet that kind of power over you?

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And we never have to be the perpetual victim of another person's bad behavior. Even if your affair partner goes nuclear on you, and your life changes in ways you really do not like as a result, you still have the power to pick up the pieces and digest the whole experience and move forward. We never have to be the permanent victim. We don't have to give anyone or anything that much power over us.

Okay everyone! If you have been listening to this and thinking, okay, I get it, but how do I apply this to my own life, then head on over to my website, mariemurphyphd.com, and schedule an introductory coaching session with me. Listening to what I talk about every week is one thing, but working directly with me to actively make changes in your own life is another thing entirely. It's like the difference between watching people do yoga, and doing it yourself, and having a teacher guide you. Or watching some sporting event on TV, and actually playing a sport yourself. And sometimes passively appreciating something is fine! But if you want changes in your infidelity situation, you have to actively make change. I can help you do it!

Have a great week everyone! Thanks for listening. Bye for now.