

Protecting your marriage from the affair

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Katharine shows how easily an affair can be started, and offers some insights into what couples can do to protect their marriage...

The heaving platform began to empty as the train drew into the station, and I squeezed onto the first available carriage. As I stood shoulder to shoulder with London commuters, I noticed a young couple opposite who stood smiling, gazing into each other's eyes. To their left was a poster that read in big bold letters, 'Mind the gap'.

Wise words, not only for users of the London underground, but also for marriage. Because it's when a couple fails to 'mind the gap' in their relationship that an affair is so easily entered into.

Sarah and Robert's was one of the first weddings we went to after leaving college. Many commented at the time that it was a match made in Heaven. Robert came to see us a few months ago. He sat at the table with his head in his hands and told us the painful news – this same marriage now lay in tatters.

Away on business

Over the next hour, he told us his story. When they were first married they had so much in common, a good social life and jobs they enjoyed. After their first child was born, Sarah continued to work part time. The pressure of Robert's work increased and he was often away on business. Imperceptibly, a gap began to open up between them. The life seemed to have gone out of their relationship.

It was against this backdrop that Robert's employers sent him on a business course. On the first evening, he was introduced to Lisa, a manager in the same line of business. As they chatted, he found that they had so much in common, and a spark was rekindled in him. He remembered thinking that this was how it used to be with Sarah when they first met. At the end of the course, they exchanged mobile numbers and agreed to keep in touch. She phoned him the following week and he agreed to meet up to discuss a business plan. The husband's need for sexual fulfilment is not met by his wife's offer of intimate conversation. In the same way, her need for affection is unlikely to be met by his suggestion of an evening together at the gym. Love needs nurture and care if it is to grow – and nurturing the love in a marriage will mean taking time to tell one another what our needs are, and then learning how to meet them. And this is not about an iron-willed determination to meet needs at all costs. Whilst it begins with a choice, the feelings often follow, as it's when we feel loved that we feel like loving. As Michelle Pfeiffer says to Bruce Willis in the film 'The Story of Us', "It's a dance you perfect over time. It's hard, much harder than I thought, but you don't just give up."

Boundaries

Another important part of minding the gap involves putting boundaries in place to protect the marriage relationship. Most affairs start with intimate conversation. So putting boundaries in place may mean saying no to lunch à deux, and proactively taking steps to avoid being alone with someone of the opposite sex to whom we're attracted. When my friend Kate found herself attracted to a colleague, she decided to confide in a trusted friend.

The encouragement and support that she gave him was a powerful magnet. The meetings became a regular event. One day she suggested that it would be easier to meet at her flat...

Unmet emotional needs

The truth was that a gap had opened up in the marriage and Lisa had filled it. Their story is not uncommon and, of course, it could just as easily have been Sarah having the affair.

The beginning of an affair generally has little to do with physical attraction but much to do with friendship, and someone other than a spouse meeting unmet emotional needs.

Protecting a marriage is about 'minding the gap', by learning how to show love to each other in a way we each understand, as well as seeking to meet each other's needs.

In my experience of speaking to couples, the failure to meet one another's needs is more often simply due to ignorance, rather than selfishness or a wilful refusal to put a partner first. The fact is that most men and women have very different needs.

But most assume their spouse's are the same as theirs, and then are frustrated when their misdirected efforts do not have the desired effect. Despite their best intentions, they fail to connect simply because they do not understand each other's needs. A Immediately the bubble burst and she found that her feelings changed.

She had put an important boundary in place.

The conversation with Robert was several months ago. He had the courage to choose to end the affair. The slow and painful process of rebuilding trust and learning to meet each other's needs has begun.

As the train pulled into the station, the young couple pushed their way to the door and stepped down from the train.

I watched them walk away down the platform hand in hand, as the familiar tannoy announcement reminded us to 'Mind the gap'.

Names have been changed to protect identity. You can find details of our *It Takes Two* event, which Katharine co-presents, on page 5.

- Discover an activity to enjoy together
- Talk honestly about how you feel
- Keep your sexual relationship alive
- Show appreciation and approval – be your spouse's 'Number 1 Fan'
- Set aside a regular time to be together
- Go on a marriage course (like *Connect2* or *The Marriage Course*)
- Set appropriate boundaries
- Seek to understand and meet each other's needs