

cheat versus betrayed

Whether it's inspired by love or by lust, infidelity doesn't wash with most of us. But there are two sides to the infidelity debate. Jo Lennox talks to one woman who was cheated on and one who cheated. Which do you identify with?

his mistress and me

— kate petersen, 35, executive assistant

"My husband John and I fell in love seven years ago and after just two months we got engaged. Shortly after that, he had to go away on business and we didn't see each other for about three months. When he returned we got married, and two weeks later I fell pregnant.

"Everything happened very fast and, in retrospect, I realise that we didn't really know each other when we took the plunge. I rushed blindly into it and ignored all the warning signs — like the fact that he had proposed to me the same year that he'd divorced his first wife.

"Our problems started soon after the wedding. As newly weds our time was spent at home with a sickly baby. The responsibility of motherhood was new to me. I love my son, but I've always been career-orientated and I found it difficult to stay at home. I became very bored and frustrated. John didn't give me the support I needed and he started spending less and less time at home.

"It was during this time that I first learnt of John's infidelity. The wife of one of his colleagues told me that he was seeing a female colleague — someone

I knew and regarded as a friend. I felt doubly betrayed and was in a state of shock. I realised that my husband must be a master of deception as I hadn't suspected anything. There had been no hints like the stereotypical lipstick on his collar.

"John's alleged mistress was young and single, but not particularly beautiful. I kept asking myself what she had that I didn't. My first instinct was to take revenge, to get back at her for seducing my husband and betraying my trust. I started to construct a malicious plan to make her pay, but I realised that I would be sinking to her level.

"Of course I knew that we had problems, but I trusted John and never suspected that he would be unfaithful. I thought we both believed in fidelity. I felt like a fool — clearly everyone in his office knew that an affair was going on behind my back.

"Despite my inner rage, I kept my emotions in check and I didn't shed a tear. When John came home that night I calmly confronted him. John denied everything and told me that I was being ridiculous. We didn't fight, but simply stopped speaking to each other. Eventually I gave in and decided to give him the benefit of the doubt. I had no proof that he was being unfaithful, and part of me

wanted to believe him. Looking back, I should have left him then.

"From then on our relationship was strained, despite our efforts to make the marriage work — I focused more attention on him and we even saw a marriage counsellor. It was hard because we both had demanding jobs and we didn't have a lot of time together. When we did, we'd often end up fighting. I hated subjecting our son to these constant outbursts, but I still felt that the attention of two parents was better than one.

"It was almost a relief when John was called away on business for six months. It was a demanding time for me as I had to cope with work, care for our son and keep house, alone. But the experience taught me that I could manage on my own. I'm a successful businesswoman, and in the workplace I'm confident, assertive and in control. I realised that John had the ability to bring out the worst in me.

"When John returned home, we had a violent row. He became physically abusive, so I threw him out. To my horror, he moved in with another woman. I missed John and became depressed without him. After about a week I asked him to come back and he promised to make an effort to make our relationship work. He also assured me that the woman he had stayed with was just a friend.

"About a year ago, I again started to suspect that my husband was having an affair as he was spending a lot of time with another female colleague. I had no proof, but when you've lived with a man for years you can sense when something is wrong — he talked about her in a special way, and when I saw them together I picked up that something was going on from their interaction. I confided in my sister who said that she'd also sensed it.

"Some evenings John would simply disappear and I wouldn't be able to reach him at the office or on his cellphone. He would come home late and say that he had left the phone in the car or that he had gone out with friends to a pub.

"After almost seven years of marriage I had lost all respect for John and I couldn't take the deceit any longer. I filed for divorce. When your husband takes an interest in other women, your self-esteem takes a knock, but I'd managed to work through those feelings and I knew I deserved better. When I look back I realise that we both made mistakes, but I don't believe that I am to blame for his infidelity. I'm held in high regard at work and have made a success of my job. I deserve the same respect at home.

"I now know that getting married to John was a

mistake, largely because we hardly knew each other at the time. But there are never any guarantees that things will work out.

"Our divorce isn't through yet and we only communicate through our lawyers. He's half-heartedly admitted in a letter to having an affair, and says that he'll tell me about it when we're officially divorced. But I don't want to hear anymore.

"I'm now looking forward to a fresh start in life. I'm moving on and my only regret is that I've wasted so many years in a dishonest relationship."

my cheating heart

— lana thompson, 29, accountant

"I met my boyfriend, Kim, eight years ago when we were both students. We immediately hit it off and were soon an inseparable couple. After two years, we decided to move in together. I had never lived with a man before and we did experience the usual domestic quarrels, but we were very much in love and would kiss and make up soon afterwards.

"After graduating, the responsibilities that came with a real job put a lot of strain on our relationship because we would both come home exhausted and irritable at the end of the day. Our frequent and experimental lovemaking had settled into a routine of once or twice a week. We knew we were heading for serious problems, but we couldn't find the time to do anything about it.

"Kim was the first man that I had ever had serious feelings for. I knew I loved him, but although we discussed marriage and children, I often felt trapped in the relationship. My friends discussed their frequent flings with me and I felt that I was missing out on being courted by different men. I also wanted to be showered with attention. As for Kim, he was one of those rare men who'd never dream of being unfaithful. His parents divorced when he was young and, consequently, he had a great respect for fidelity.

"My relationship with Kim fell into a routine and it lacked the excitement I longed for. When he had to go away for a few days to see his father, we both agreed that we needed the break from each other. I took the opportunity to see more of my friends. One night, we decided to go out on the town.

"I had no intention of being unfaithful to Kim, but when I was introduced to Brian at a club, there was instant chemistry between us. He was much older than me and a real charmer, and we soon started flirting. I tried to convince myself that we were just having innocent fun, but I secretly hoped that Brian would at least attempt to kiss me. I hadn't been out with my friends for months and I really wanted to

enjoy myself. We all got really drunk and Brian invited me over to his place. I had never done anything like that before, but the booze made me feel wild and adventurous and I accepted his offer. We had sex twice that night. The next morning I woke with a hangover and a feeling of terrible guilt. I thought of all my years with Kim and the commitment we had made to each other. I realised that our relationship was the most important thing in my life and I felt miserable because I had just jeopardised it.

"I called in sick at work and spent the whole day sobbing alone in our flat. Kim was due to come home the next day and I wasn't sure if I should tell him or not. I slept with Brian to feel attractive and wanted — despite the fact that I knew that Kim loved me and thought I was beautiful. I tried to sort out my feelings but my mind was still dwelling on the excitement of the night before.

"Kim came home the next day in a very good mood. He told me how much he had missed me and that the few days apart made him realise that he'd neglected me. His honesty and devotion made me feel worse. Kim was asking my forgiveness for not being perfect, while I'd betrayed him in the worst possible way just hours before. I couldn't face telling him, and decided that it would be easier to live with my conscience. It wasn't easy. Every time we made love, I thought of my night with Brian and what Kim would do if he ever found out. It haunted me for months. I finally concluded that it would be best if he never knew.

"After four years of living together, we decided to get engaged. I was still battling with my conscience and debating whether or not to tell Kim about my betrayal before he put a ring on my finger, when he found out from someone else.

"He asked me to meet him for lunch. When I arrived I could tell that something was wrong. He said one of my friends had told him about Brian, but that he didn't believe it and wanted to hear the truth from me. After this revelation Kim became unnaturally quiet and I couldn't get myself to look at him. We sat in silence for about 15 minutes before I finally told him that I loved him. When I saw the naked emotion on his face, I couldn't bear it any longer and told him everything. I explained that what had happened had meant nothing to me and that I hadn't told him because I had been afraid of losing him.

"That evening Kim and I discussed our relationship. He was very hurt and repeatedly said he couldn't believe it. We both cried and I felt terribly ashamed. He told me that he loved me and would try to forgive me. We decided to start over. I was

determined to make it up to him.

"For months afterwards we didn't discuss the 'Brian Incident', but the trust between us had been irreparably shattered. After about three months we decided to break up. It was a mutual decision and we decided that it would be best for both of us. After Kim moved out we still phoned each other, but we hardly had anything to say.

"I still run into Kim from time to time, but I would hardly call us friends. He's in a steady relationship now and I'm also seeing someone. I often think of our time together and it hurts to know that I broke up a wonderful relationship, but we've both moved on now.

"I haven't cheated on anyone again and I don't think I ever will. I blame my infidelity on the fact that Kim and I were too young when we met and our relationship became too serious too soon. I'm really only ready for a relationship like that now. I have to say that I now find it hard to trust my partner. If it was so easy for me to be unfaithful, I can't see what would be stopping him."

* Names have been changed to protect the privacy of our interviewees.

why do we cheat? a psychologist comments

When people feel attracted to each other, the physiological response is to fall in 'lust'. But being in love is a fantasy world which doesn't include negatives, and when reality sets in couples often experience problems. Often it is the search for that initial fantasy world and the associated addictive high which leads to an affair. This was certainly the case for Lana who was inexperienced in relationships and thought the fantasy would last forever.

When it comes to marriage, couples often want it all — emotionally, sexually, intellectually and socially. Invariably the relationship falls short, and they try to meet these outside the marriage. In John and Kate's case they had the added pressure of a sickly baby.

Both women say they tried to make their relationships work after the betrayal. But trying doesn't simply mean staying together. It includes evaluating and dealing with problems, identifying areas of strength and improvement. If this concerted effort fails there's no need to live unhappily ever after and couples should consider breaking up. Kate gave John far too many chances and should have let go earlier.

An affair can have an upside: it can highlight problems, and if initial feelings of hurt and betrayal can be overcome, couples often feel more free to deal with their real problems.

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