

**L**ynne Sullivan\* has a crush on Frank Benson. He's a bright young manager from her company's downtown office. Lynne's feelings for Frank blossomed shortly after he began visiting her branch several times a week to help with the work load. "I loved how we communicated right away," she says.

"Frank really respects my intelligence, my opinions. He makes me feel so competent. And we laugh a lot, too."

But Lynne's attraction to Frank causes her much worry, as well. "We're both happily married—to other people," she says. "I really love my husband, but there's this incredible physical and emotional excitement I feel when I'm around Frank. Sometimes I feel very guilty about it."

Nancy Rose's heart skips a beat when she sees her doctor. "I really have a thing for him," she says, blushing. "I love the way he listens to me—something my husband doesn't always do. My doctor's so warm and gentle, and good-looking, too. I find myself having all kinds of fantasies about him. Sometimes I wonder if he feels anything special for me, and I daydream about what would happen if he did."

Lynne is involved in an affair of the heart, as is Nancy. Both women feel emotionally and physically attracted to men other than their husbands, but they're not having sex with these men. Experts say that such "affairs" are, in fact, quite common among married women and men—ranging in intensity from crushes to full-blown sexual fantasies. But whatever the circumstances, if you're involved in an affair of the heart, it's likely that the excitement you feel will be accompanied by other, more troubling emotions: guilt, anxiety, even discontent with a spouse. Like Lynne, many married women who have crushes ask: Is it possible to love my husband and, at the same time, be wildly attracted to someone else? What does this say about my marriage? And furthermore, what does it say about *me*?

Many sex therapists assert that it's not incompatible for a woman to have a solid marriage *and* to have affection and desire for other men. Indeed, most affairs of the heart are simply part of being human and having the very human need for an occasional mental escape from everyday reality. Being married, after all, does not mean that you're automatically blinded to the charms of other men, or that you'll never have a delicious sexual fantasy starring someone new and different. In fact, according to a 1979 study of 120 people conducted by Mark F. Schwartz, Sc.D., and William H. Masters, M.D., of the Masters and Johnson Institute in St. Louis, the most common fantasy among heterosexual men and women is having sex with someone other than their spouse—generally a specific friend or acquaintance.

But does having such a fantasy mean you're at real risk of infidelity? "If you're like most people, you have fantasies of all types," says Dagmar O'Connor, director of the Sexual Therapy Program at St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital Center in New York City and author of *How to Make Love to the Same Person for the Rest of Your Life* (Bantam, 1986). "Just as you may have fantasies of winning

\*NAMES HAVE BEEN CHANGED TO PROTECT PRIVACY.

a million dollars or living in a mansion, you may have a romantic daydream—and this doesn't make you unfaithful. Thoughts, feelings and fantasies simply happen. But actual sexual affairs *don't* just happen." As adults, she says, we're responsible for our actions, but we needn't feel guilty about our emotions, or about flirtations that we don't allow to turn into a sexual affair.

Affairs that exist strictly in the mind, according to Doris Lion, Ph.D., a psychotherapist in Encino, California, can be one of the real joys of life, particularly when your self-esteem is flagging. "An affair of the heart can trigger youthful enthusiasm," says Dr. Lion. "It can bring you the joy of feeling desirable." In other words, after you've had a milestone birthday and you feel over the hill, or after you've put on a few pounds and feel unattractive, a little crush or flirtation can give your spirits a needed boost.

And most wives need an occasional boost—because marriage is marked by myriad cycles of emotion. Husbands and wives go through periods of closeness and distance, love and anger, disappointment and delight. There are times of excitement and of boredom—and days when the love between the two of you seems to wax and wane.

"In a marriage, you are constantly falling in and out of love with each other," says Barry Levine, Psy.D., a psychotherapist

# AFFAIRS

in Canyon Country, California. "Adults are, deep down, still children at some level, and love is partly a function of that child within us. Remember how, as a little girl, you loved your best friend one day—then hated her the next and loved her again the following day? Love—even in good marriages—has its ups and downs, its high and low points. Liking each other, however, is more stable, more constant—more a function of the part of us that is a mature adult." Liking your spouse and being committed to him, says Dr. Levine, are, in a sense, like glue—they hold a marriage together throughout the fluctuations of passionate love. And as long as your marriage has enough glue, you'll be able to recognize your fantasy for what it is—simply a pleasant mental escape during a low point in your relationship.

If your pleasant escapes turn into obsessive dwelling on another man, or if you use an imagined love life to focus in on what you don't like about your husband, your marriage may be in trouble. You could be using your affair as a way to avoid *acknowledging* problems in your marriage that need your attention. For example, having a crush on your husband's best friend could be a way of subconsciously venting anger at your spouse rather than telling him what (continued on page 164)

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you're really upset about. O'Connor advises: "When you find yourself attracted to a close friend of your husband's, ask yourself why, with so many attractive people around, you are fixated on this particular man. Are you trying to hurt your husband? If so, it's important to understand *why* you're angry and to address the problem with him."

Another sign of a deteriorating marriage is when you're easily turned on by thoughts of many other men—but *never* by your husband. "Husbands and wives turn each

other off for many reasons," says O'Connor. "For example, if you treat your husband like a little boy—picking up after him, telling him what to wear—the unconscious incest taboo may cause you to retreat sexually from him." On the other hand, a husband may distance himself from his wife as a way of expressing resentment over things that aren't perfect in the marriage. But "no affair of the heart will miraculously make your life wonderful for you," O'Connor says. "Only *you* can make your life wonderful—by being open about your feelings and needs and by acknowledging and working out the problems in your marriage."

Of course, it goes without saying that if you give in to temptation and have an actual sexual affair, you'll harm—and

possibly ruin—your marriage. But by making the decision *not* to become sexually involved, you can use your affair of the heart to *enhance* several aspects of your marriage:

● **Communication.** Let's say that, like Nancy Rose, you have a crush on a compassionate man who listens. Or perhaps, like Lynne Sullivan, you work with a man who invariably focuses on your positive qualities. This may be a clue that you need your husband to be more understanding or more supportive of your work. By letting your husband know what you need—a non-judgmental ear, a dose of praise—you can give your relationship a boost.

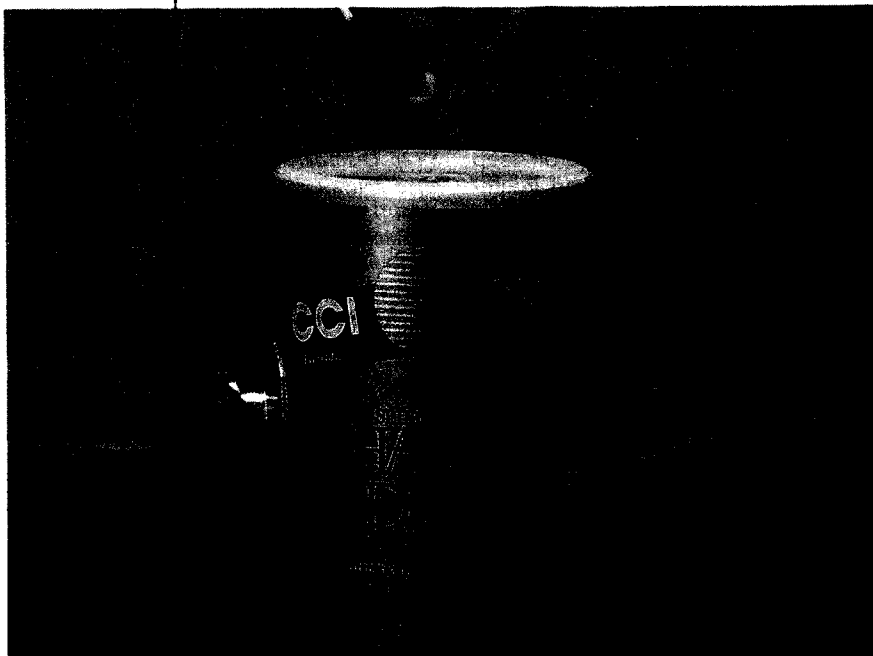
"It's common to be the most critical of those closest to you," says O'Connor. "You may focus on your husband's faults and at the same time focus on a new man's good qualities. So switch your thoughts around. Think about the negative aspects of the man who seems so perfect. Then concentrate on what's wonderful in your husband."

Try treating your husband like you treat your crush. Shelly Anderson, now a happily married mother of two, says, "I realized not long ago that I always listened to my special male friend. I always showed an interest in his ideas, and I always tried to look my best when I saw him. With my husband, I would half-listen and not do anything special to look more attractive. My affair of the heart helped me to realize how much energy I *wasn't* putting into my marriage. Now I'm learning to make the same effort with my *husband* that I did with my special friend."

● **Independence.** If you've had a crush on a man who can discuss the ballet with you for hours, but your own husband would rather be tortured than sit through twenty minutes of the dance, don't dwell on how much more refined this other man is than your husband. Try to find some hobby or interest that you and your husband both enjoy. Additionally, don't give up on enjoying the ballet with someone who appreciates it. Call a friend, a colleague, a cousin, a neighbor, to see if one of them would like to accompany you. Then, when you return home, you and your husband will be able to enjoy each other's company—as separate, yet connected and loving, partners.

● **Romance.** A crush can reawaken the sexy and romantic feelings you had when you first fell in love with your husband. If you channel those feelings your husband's way, both of you may feel a renewed sense of passion. "Your husband can *become* your dream lover," says O'Connor. And that is perhaps the happiest possible outcome of an affair of the heart. ●

*Kathleen McCoy is the author of nine books. Her articles on sexuality and relationships have appeared in numerous national magazines.*




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