

## The New Monogamy: How To Redefine Your Relationship After Infidelity

Transcript:

*Clinton Power:* Hello. This is Clinton Power, founder of [AustraliaCounselling.com.au](http://AustraliaCounselling.com.au). It's my great pleasure to present to you today an interview with Dr. Tammy Nelson who's an acclaimed sex and relationship therapist and the author of several books on this topic. Today, we talk about infidelity, sex, and relationships.

We touch on whether couples can ever recover from an affair. We talk about what is the new monogamy, and can it apply to any couple or only for couples recovering from affairs? We touch on what is erotic recovery and why it's essential for couples who have been through a betrayal.

Tammy also talks about whether it's possible to forgive your partner after they cheat, and will you ever trust again? She shares one thing couples can do today to prevent an affair or change their sex life. Finally, we touch on open marriages, can they really work, what heterosexual couples can learn from gay couples, and we find out about some of her upcoming projects.

Dr. Tammy Nelson is the author of several books, including, "Getting the Sex You Want: Shed Your Inhibitions and Reach New Heights of Passion Together." Her latest book is, "The New Monogamy: Redefining Your Relationship After Infidelity." She's been a featured expert in the New York Times, Washington Post, Cosmopolitan, MSNBC, Men's Health, and Time Magazine, and many other publications.

I think you're really going to enjoy this interview with Dr. Tammy Nelson. If you'd like to find out more about her, just go to [DrTammyNelson.com](http://DrTammyNelson.com) and you can read lots of fantastic information and articles about sex and relationships. Here's the interview with Dr. Tammy Nelson. Hello. It's Clinton Power here. It's my great pleasure to be with Dr. Tammy Nelson today. We're talking about sex, relationships, and monogamy. Hello, Tammy. How are you today?

*Dr Tammy Nelson:* I'm great. Thank you so much for having me.

*Clinton Power:* It's such a pleasure. I've wanted to talk to you for such a long time because I've been a big fan of your work. You're doing this wonderful work. Your books, "The New Monogamy" and "Getting the Sex You Want", fantastic books. Now, you are a sex and relationship therapist. Tell us, maybe to start with, what has been some of your observations in regards to infidelity? Do you think that the rates have gone up, and why do you think so?

*Dr Tammy Nelson:* Well, it's very interesting because we're talking at an interesting time in the world when [AshleyMadison.com](http://AshleyMadison.com) just got hacked. I was speaking to a friend. Ashley Madison is a website for cheaters. "Life is short. Have an affair," is their slogan. It's for people that are married to have an affair with other people that are married, or to cheat and get away with it.

We've been having this conversation about just this. Has infidelity gone up? Are more people doing it? Are more people trying to get away with it? Interestingly, the people that are being exposed or are threatened to be exposed in Ashley Madison are actually in the middle of a real existential crisis. Some of them are saying that they're actually from other countries

where they could be imprisoned or even killed for infidelity. Some of them are in high-ranking government positions where ...

You may not feel this in Australia, but here in the US, they've downplayed this whole thing about the fact that this major website is getting hacked into and some privacy issues are coming to the forefront. We think it's because some major political players, and perhaps some people in the military, are actually on Ashley Madison.

*Clinton Power:* Yeah, it's also a pretty big news story here at the moment as well, Tammy. A lot of Australians are also on that side, so it's very relevant for us as well. Yeah.

*Dr Tammy Nelson:* Well, and I think just what you're saying. The fact that it's relevant there and relevant here that it's really an international phenomena, that people are going online to cheat, that there are venues where they are creating a pathway for infidelity. To answer your question, I think the rate of infidelity has gone up. This is the first time in history that you could cheat on your partner, lying in bed next to them.

*Clinton Power:* Incredible. What do you think is so appealing about cheating on a partner or infidelity, and even the rise of sites like Ashley Madison? Why are we seeing this rise?

*Dr Tammy Nelson:* Well, I think part of it is the fact that in this time in history, we are living longer than we've ever lived before, so we're expected to be attracted to the same person for 10, 15, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, sometimes 70, 80 years. I think for some people, just the longevity of desire freaks us out. The expansion of the possibilities with the internet, it creates so many opportunities and so much intrigue that we have what I think is a very compartmentalized view of relationships and sexuality.

We feel like we can compartmentalize a lot of our interests sexually. A lot of our relationships in general are compartmentalized in different boxes. "I have my friend that I talk to on Facebook, and I have another relationship with someone that I only text, and I have someone else that I know on Ashley Madison, and someone that I look at on porn." We have all these little boxes now.

*Clinton Power:* Yes. One of the things I've noticed as well is this idea of being able to, in Imago therapy, you call it a relationship exit. It's never been easy to exit a relationship in that virtual way. For some people, it feels very innocent because they're not actually doing anything. I've noticed, working with couples over many years, that for one couple, that's not a big deal, yet for another couple, that could be defined as an affair. What are your thoughts on that?

*Dr Tammy Nelson:* Well, I think that's very true, what you're saying. I think we all have this explicit monogamy agreement where out loud we say we're not going to sleep with someone else or, "I promise never to have intercourse with someone else," but implicitly, we don't talk about what may be the betrayals are that happen long before that occurs.

I don't say, "I promise to love, honor you, and never have a Facebook friend, or never masturbate without telling you, or never go to a strip club." There's a lot of things that we just don't talk about that we implicitly assume are either private or that we keep secret. We don't talk about the difference between privacy and secrecy.

*Clinton Power:* Yes. I know Dan Savage talks about this idea of ‘monogamish’ that’s a viable alternative. I’m curious, are you familiar with that term? What are your thoughts on that?

*Dr Tammy Nelson:* Yeah, and I understand that that came from the idea of gay men having a more open, implicit assumption around what monogamy means, that you can be emotionally monogamous while being more sexually open. I think what I’m saying is you can define your monogamy as anything you want it to be. I don’t define people’s monogamy.

What I encourage people to do is to not let their church or their community or their parents or anyone define what they want their monogamy to be, but I do encourage people to have a very explicit conversation about what they want their monogamy to be, even during different phases of their relationship, because it changes. As we age, we want different things.

*Clinton Power:* Absolutely. Now maybe we can talk about the couple that has experienced an affair because a lot of people have the question, “Is it possible to recover from an affair?” We know that many couples don’t, that often, that is an absolute deal breaker and it’s the end of the relationship at that point. What can couples expect after infidelity if they choose to stay together?

*Dr Tammy Nelson:* Well, I think it needs to be said that some affairs are what I call “can openers”. They are definitely a way to get out of a relationship. I just had a couple in my office where she said very clearly, “I had the affair because I know that that’s the make-or-break line. That broke the explicit monogamy agreement, and I know that that means that it’s a way to end the marriage.”

For many couples, though, it’s not the end of the marriage. For those couples, it can be a wake-up call. It can be a way to say, “Wait a minute. Is this what we want? Do we want to go in different direction?” For some couples, it can be a way to finish off a developmental phase of their life that they never completed.

For some couples, the way that I describe it is I talk to them about it’s not so much about what you did to the marriage, but about who you became when you were with this outside person. It’s really important that even if you end the affair that you recognize who you wanted to be when you’re with that outside person because if you don’t integrate that part of yourself back into the marriage, that part is going to either go underground or it’s going to resurface at some point. You can’t just cut that part of you off and pretend it doesn’t belong. It has to be integrated.

That’s how I define integrity, is that you can integrate all those compartments that I was talking about, all those parts of yourself, and bring them all into the marriage. You don’t have to be all those people because you’re entitled to have privacy and parts that you don’t want to be with your spouse, but you have to own that you have those parts because when they’re split off and hidden, then that’s what causes shame. To live in integrity means to honor all the parts of the self.

*Clinton Power:* I love what you’re saying about that, Tammy. It reminds me of just a number of couples. I work with a lot of gay couples. Just recently, my practice has been getting a number of gay men who are in monogamous relationships, yet they’re feeling distressed because they feel compelled to have anonymous sex with others. I’m always curious about what are they getting from the extracurricular sex that’s not happening in the relationship?

This idea of who you're becoming in the other relationship or the other encounter sounds like is very relevant to that situation as well.

*Dr Tammy Nelson:* I think it's powerful to ask someone, "How did you feel about yourself," or, "Who did you become when you were with that other person," particularly in front of the partner, the primary partner or the spouse, because you can watch them almost change into that person. "I felt alive," or, "I felt sexy," or, "I felt kinky," or, "I felt more masculine or more feminine," or whatever.

They become this other person, and then you can confront that idea that, "Well, are you blaming your partner that you can't become that with them? Are you blaming them for not allowing that part in," because usually, it's not about that. Usually, it's not, "Well, my wife won't let me do that to her," or, "My husband isn't that sexy. He doesn't like it when I'm like that." Sometimes, that's the case for sure, but not always.

*Clinton Power:* Now in your book, "The New Monogamy: Redefining Your Relationship After Infidelity," let me just touch on how are you defining the new monogamy. Can it apply to any couples or is this only for couples recovering from affairs?

*Dr Tammy Nelson:* Well, a lot of people use The New Monogamy to begin different phases of their relationship because I have a lot of questions in there that apply to what I call the "continuum of monogamy". Some people, if they have a fantasy about someone else, they feel like they've cheated in their minds, so they have to come home and share with their partner because a fantasy for them could be a slippery slope. If they masturbate fantasizing to someone else, or if they look at pornography, or if they have a sexy dance with someone at a club.

There's a whole continuum that goes up to masturbating online with someone in an anonymous webcam, or to having anonymous sex, like you were describing, with someone where there's no emotional connection, or to having an emotional affair maybe with someone at work like your work spouse that you see more than your partner. You never have a sexual connection to, but there's really a deep connection because you share everything in your life that you're too exhausted to share with your partner when you come home.

Or maybe you have someone on the side where you have a whole parallel marriage. You have a whole emotional, sexual, spiritual connection to, maybe even children, but you never share it with your partner. Or maybe you have an open marriage and you're "allowed" to do whatever you want, but there's that one person that you have coffee with that you don't tell anyone else and your open marriage about.

There's a lot of ways to cheat, and in The New Monogamy, there's ways to ask each other questions about all of those phases on the continuum and what each of you want. What each of you desires in those phases. Do you want to share things in your fantasy life? Do you want to tell each other every time you masturbate? Is it okay to have an outside partner as long as you don't have intercourse? Those questions in the book just begin an open dialog about how to define your monogamy and what works for you. Whether you've had an affair or not, I think it's important to continue to look at your monogamy and what you want from your relationship.

*Clinton Power:* Yeah, I love that in your book, Tammy, that you really open ... well, you help people start the conversations, and they're very honest and direct conversations that couples need to have with each other. I can understand it's easy in a relationship to get to a point where you just forget to have those honest, direct conversations, but they can be so incredibly liberating and exciting when you start to open up in that very honest way. Let's talk about erotic recovery. Can you share with the audience what that is? You touched on this in your book as well.

*Dr Tammy Nelson:* Yeah, I really believe that after an affair, the goal is not forgiveness. I think a lot of the literature around affair recovery only brings you so far. The goal is not forgiveness. Forgiveness is temporary. If you're mad at your partner, you're going to take it back. The goal is really erotic recovery because an affair is an erotic injury to that part of your relationship.

In order to really recover from an affair, you have to really work on the erotic part of your relationship, not your companionship. Not like who's going to take out the garbage and how come we can't communicate about daily things, but you have to really work on your erotic life. Otherwise, that third person is still in bed with you.

Until you really work on what is it that we can fantasize about, how do we fulfill each other's fantasies, how do we really move our erotic life to the next level, once you can do that, why would you ever want to be with someone else, frankly? Or if you do want to be with someone else, it's usually with your partner because you have such a range of delight and pleasure that there's no need to split off your erotic energy outside of the relationship. It's all there for you.

*Clinton Power:* This could be quite a dilemma for couples who have been through an affair, because often what I see, and I'm wondering if you see this as well, Tammy, is one partner will tend to shut down sexually, whether it's to punish the other partner or whether ... Sometimes they say they just don't feel safe opening up and being vulnerable in that way. That can create a real dilemma. How do you work with that in the context of erotic recovery?

*Dr Tammy Nelson:* Well, you're very on target with that. The goal is not forgiveness or even trust, the goal is empathy. Once a partner gets to the place where they see why the partner cheated, not so they can blame the victim and they can blame themselves, but I'll give you an example. I had a couple who came for a two-day intensive, and she was enraged that he had cheated. She was throwing things at him. She was really, really hurt.

Then when we got to the part of our dialoguing about their sex life and what he had gotten out of the affair and who he became, she had this awakening. She said, "Your affair allowed me to avoid my own sexuality because while you were off having sex with this other person, I didn't have to look at what I was not working on in my sexuality because we didn't have to go any further in our erotic life."

It turned out that she had some abuse in her history. She was really pushing him away for a long time not because she didn't love him, but because there were things that she didn't want to work on in herself, and it was almost a relief. That was such a shock to her and it was so painful, but it was also such a release of energy, not because she could blame herself, but because she could finally look at herself.

I've seen it so many times, not to blame the other person, but to look at the collusion that's sometimes so subtle. What happens is not only does the person who's cheating find a new part of themselves, but the person who's been cheated on many times finds a strength and a new identity. Maybe it's that they realize that it's not that they're angry at their partner, that they're really angry at themselves because they could no longer trust their own intuition.

They find this anger at themselves that actually gives them strength to learn to discern between intuition and fear. Suddenly, they feel a new level of confidence in their life. "I don't need to listen to you to tell me whether or not I can trust you. All I have to do is learn to trust my own inner voice again," and that's incredible empowering. Many times, people find a new erotic self through that empowerment. I've seen both men and women do that.

*Clinton Power:* What a wonderful story. Now, Tammy, you touched on forgiveness and trust, but do you believe that partners can forgive and that they can ever trust each other again after an affair? I'm also thinking of the affair, a situation when perhaps an affair has gone on for many years and is then revealed, and the pain is very deep. What are your thoughts on that?

*Dr Tammy Nelson:* Well, I think that once someone has cheated, there's an existential crisis that happens when you realize, "If you're not going to hold me above everyone else, then no one ever will. If I'm not the most special person to you, then I'm just not the most special person in the universe." You realize that marriage or committed partnership is not unconditional. There are conditions.

"No one is going to love me like my mother or my father did", which was totally unconditional love. That marriage is conditional. Perhaps one of the conditions is that you don't cheat on me, and I'm allowed to say that this is not okay. Maybe the marriage is over. If I want you to stick around and if I want to work through this maybe going forward, these are my conditions. Perhaps one of the conditions is that we can't go three or four years without having sex. Maybe that's not okay. "Who's rule is it that it's okay for me to withhold sex but it's not okay for you to cheat?"

Part of that is really working on what are the monogamy rules going forward, but trust is also not about making sure the person who cheated jumps through a bunch of hoops to prove that they're trustworthy going forward. It's really an inside job. It's really looking at, "How do I learn to trust my own intuition again because once someone has betrayed me, I realize I don't know if I could trust my inner voice again. Maybe I did know but I didn't listen, or maybe I should have known and I didn't trust my inner voice."

It's a long process to learn to trust myself again has nothing to do really with the other person. It's a long road back to realizing that, "I can never trust someone else because I don't have any control over what someone else does, but I can learn to trust myself. Once I know I can trust myself, it doesn't matter what someone else says. I'll always know the truth."

That's a very powerful thing. I just want to say this one last thing. There's a shift from a very innocent love to a much more mature love when you realize there is no more naiveté. "It's not like I love you hoping you'll never hurt me. I'm going to love you knowing that I'll probably get hurt and choosing to love you anyway." That's what grownup love is.

*Clinton Power:* I think that's very true. Tammy, what is one thing couples can do today to prevent an affair, or perhaps even change their sex life?

*Dr Tammy Nelson:* Well, I don't know if you can ever prevent an affair, but you can definitely change your sex life because, again, you can't control what another person does, but you can constantly revisit what is important for you, and to remember. I mean that in both ways. To remember what you are together to help each other remember.

In other words, what is it that I'm here to help my partner remember and why is he or she in my life to help me remember, and that your sex life is sacred. Your erotic life is a sacred space that you have to create. It doesn't just happen on its own. It won't just fall into place. It doesn't matter if you're getting along or arguing. You have to create it.

It has to be a sacred date, just like yoga or meditation. You have to carve it out of your daily life and show up for it with the sacredness and the commitment that it deserves. Honor and know that there is nothing else in life where you can connect to another person physically, emotionally, and spiritually like your erotic life. That has to be honored and respected.

*Clinton Power:* Tammy, are you a fan of scheduling sex?

*Dr Tammy Nelson:* I think you deserve a sex date because if you can get up and go to yoga with the same honor and respect and namaste-ing, then you should have a sex date once a week where you carve out that time and you light the candle and you put the clean sheets on. You honor and show up to each other to create an erotic space and create that sacredness. We're all grownups. We're not going to come home and scrape the dishes off the kitchen table and say, "Take me now!" Who has time for that?

*Clinton Power:* Exactly. Let's touch on open marriages. Do you think they can really work? Is open marriage a recipe for disaster?

*Dr Tammy Nelson:* I think open marriage can be defined by the couple in many different ways. For some couples, going to a club and watching other people have sex is an open marriage. For some couples, having sex with their friends on the weekends together is an open marriage. For some couples, watching pornography together is an open marriage. For some couples, having a partner on the side or a third person is an open marriage. For some, it's just being open about your fantasies.

I think that the term "open marriage" means many different things to many different people. The core of open marriage is being open. Being open to discuss everything before, during, after, and constantly. If people can be open about their marriage ... What's the opposite of that? Being closed, never talking, never discussing, never moving forward.

I don't believe in a closed marriage. I believe in always being open. I think the people that communicate really well about their longings and their feelings and their dreams are the ones that make it work. The people that can't connect over their longings and their desires and their dreams will struggle.

*Clinton Power:* I love that description, Tammy. Wonderful. I'm curious, do you think that heterosexual couples can learn anything from gay couples? It seems to me gay couples for a

long time have negotiated many of these things to do with monogamy, non-monogamy, polyamory. What are your thoughts on that?

*Dr Tammy Nelson:* I think gay male couples have been doing it quite well in many ways. I think the capacity to experience joy and pleasure in your partner's joy and pleasure and not see it as something that takes away from your pleasure ... It's like somehow we have a bank, and if your partner is finding pleasure in someone else's body or in someone else's experience, it takes away from my bank with him is a very heterosexual experience.

I explain it by if my gay male friends are walking down the street and they nudge each other and say, "Ooh, check out that guy," they can both find pleasure in it. If my husband nudges me and says, "Ooh, check out that girl," I'm like, "Hey!" It feels a little different, but I think if ...

*Clinton Power:* Do you think that's cultural?

*Dr Tammy Nelson:* I think it's cultural and I think it's a matter of being able to be more open-hearted and more firm in the foundation of the relationship. There's a little bit of a belief in lack, like, "There's not enough for me. If I feel there's enough for me, then there's nothing that can take away from what we have." I do believe that this is a very difficult thing for women in some cases. I think we're getting it, and I think things are changing.

I think young people, the younger generation, is better at it than the older generation, and I think they're defining it differently. If you ask young people if they're polyamorous, they say, "No," and then you ask them if they have outside relationships, they say, "Well, I'm in love with a couple of people, and we all know it. We all live together." They just don't like the terms, and so I think a lot of the terminology will change, but I think we're moving in a very tribal direction in general.

*Clinton Power:* Great. Tell us, Tammy, what are you working on now and in the future? What's coming up for you?

*Dr Tammy Nelson:* Well, I am working on a new book, and I'm also working on writing a pilot episode for television. I think that there's so much programming out there for television and so much good television that I'd like to somehow make an impact on TV without just creating something that's exploitative, but I'm not sure. I haven't found the right venue for it.

I want to keep writing, and also, write about something that adds, I think, a spiritual element to the couple's work that I haven't been able to write about. I keep searching, and I keep writing, and keep speaking, and keep speaking to bigger groups and to younger people who continue to amaze me by their open-mindedness.

*Clinton Power:* Fantastic. Do you still offer intensives if a couple wants to save their marriage or need a tuneup? Is that something you still do today?

*Dr Tammy Nelson:* Yeah, I do see couples anywhere from four hours to four days. They come to me from all over the world, and I go to them if I'm traveling. That's always nice. I can also meet with people online if they can't travel. I'm happy to talk to people and answer any questions. I'd like to offer any of your listeners a free gift. I can give them an excerpt from my book for questions for their monogamy agreement. If they want to write to me at [tammy@drtammynelson](mailto:tammy@drtammynelson) and mention your podcast, I'm happy to give them that handout for free.



*Clinton Power:* Fantastic. We'll put all the details in our show notes as well. The email is [tammy@drtammynelson.com](mailto:tammy@drtammynelson.com). Wonderful talking to you today, Tammy. I feel like I could talk about this all day. It's such a fascinating and interesting area for me. I can just hear your passion just shines through so strongly. If people just want to connect with you or find out more about you, where is the best place for them to go?

*Dr Tammy Nelson:* They can go to my website which is [www.DrTammyNelson.com](http://www.DrTammyNelson.com). It's D-R-T-A-M-M-Y-N-E-L-S-O-N.com. [DrTammyNelson.com](http://DrTammyNelson.com).

*Clinton Power:* Fantastic. Your books, "The New Monogamy" and "Getting the Sex You Want", where is the best place for people to find your books?

*Dr Tammy Nelson:* They can find them on my website, [DrTammyNelson.com](http://DrTammyNelson.com), or on Amazon. If they want a signed copy, they can go through my website, or if they want it mailed to them directly, they can certainly find it through Amazon or Barnes & Noble. Any of the major sites.

*Clinton Power:* Fantastic. Well, I'm looking forward to you writing your new book, Tammy. I hope we can speak again sometime.

*Dr Tammy Nelson:* Thank you so much for having me. It's such a pleasure to talk to you.

*Clinton Power:* Bye for now.