

Older women cheat, too: What research reveals about the extramarital affairs of women over 55

Four reasons older women have affairs

By

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Are extramarital affairs confined to those in the first half of life? Does a woman's interest in having a romantic relationship outside of the marriage vows wane after menopause? Apparently not, says Susan Shapiro Barash, author of "[A Passion for More: Affairs that Make or Break Us](#)," who released a revised and updated version of her 2001 book in October, 2022.

For the past 30 years, Barash has been studying female infidelity and her most recent finding is that "gray affairs," while unusual when she first started interviewing her volunteer subjects, are now quite common.

In her three decades of anecdotal, qualitative research she has focused exclusively on heterosexual women, and the subjects she has interviewed represent a wide spectrum of ethnicity, race, religion, financial status, educational level and childbearing status. However, her most recent appeal for interview candidates yielded more women over 55 than any other age group.

In the past three years, Barash has interviewed women in their 60s, 70s, and 80s, with the oldest being 83. Her book covers all age groups, but, in her words, "what women over 50 reported in this round of interviews was a notable finding for me and a departure from the earlier years of tracking female infidelity."

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One of the more interesting discoveries from her research is that 90% of the women surveyed (of all ages) had no guilt or remorse about their actions. Women reported actively pursuing their affairs with a sense of entitlement.

Barash has attributed much of that sentiment to women having a greater sense of self-esteem in their lives. They earn a living, they buy what they need, and they have a sense of agency in their lives that wasn't true for most women 30 years ago. She found that older women are similar to younger women in their willingness to engage in extramarital affairs, for a variety of reasons.

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Four types of ‘gray affairs’

In addition, Barash found that older women’s affairs fell into the same categories as that of their younger counterparts:

Empowering affairs: With more opportunities for women today in every aspect of life, some women now engage with younger men and in workplace affairs. There is a strong corollary here with the much older story of the successful male executive who engages in an affair with a younger woman. Barash relates this “boy-toy” mentality to a fear of aging.

Sex-driven affairs: Usually the result of stale marriages in which the physical connection had dwindled. The major component of this type of affair is the sex, which comes with fewer boundaries or rules. Women who talked to Barash about these kinds of affairs frequently reported an out-of-body experience they weren’t willing (or able) to have with their husbands.

Love affairs: Unanticipated and often heartbreaking, these affairs happen when women least expect them. Often, they break up the marriage or are used as a wake-up call for the husband to re-evaluate the relationship and battle for his wife to stay.

Self-esteem affairs: Women who describe these kinds of affairs talk of feeling overwhelmed with the responsibilities of work, caring for children of all ages, and/or household duties. The new man makes them feel special in a way their husbands do not.

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Reliable numbers are hard to find

One of Barash’s more interesting findings is that extramarital affairs don’t necessarily lead to the breakup of the marriage. In over half of the cases she chronicled, the marriage stayed intact and was sometimes strengthened by the affair, whether or not the liaison was disclosed to the spouse.

Often it is a wake-up call that the marriage or primary relationship is languishing and needs attention. In other cases, an affair may serve as a pressure-release valve on the marriage, lowering a woman’s expectations of her husband to be all things to her, and in an odd way allowing her to be happier *within* her marriage.

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Barash’s anecdotal research does not lend itself to an estimate of the prevalence of infidelity in older women. In other literature, there are widely varying estimates of the prevalence of infidelity in American society. Some experts claim it is as low as [35%](#), other put it at [over 50%](#). Reliable numbers are difficult to find in the literature and most researchers agree that the subject is challenging to study due to the reluctance of subjects to honestly disclose their behavior.

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