

WE NEED TO
TALK ABOUT
LOVE

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B L O O M S B U R Y S I G M A
L O N D O N • O X F O R D • N E W Y O R K • N E W D E L H I • S Y D N E Y

Don't Give Me Drugs

I was on holiday in Ibiza, staying at a villa that belonged to a charming couple who had popped by a few times to see how we were. Eventually, I asked the wife whether I could interview her and she obliged. We sat on opposite sun loungers overlooking a landscaped garden and an aquamarine pool.

I often change people's names to preserve their anonymity and, before starting the interview, I suggested that we call her Melissa.

'Oh, God, no,' she said, 'any name but Melissa ... That was the name of the girl my husband had an affair with ...' She let out a deep laugh and suggested another name, Lisa, before adding: 'In my life, love has had to be very forgiving, understanding, tolerant.'

Like many of the older people I spoke to, Lisa explained that love is much more exciting and heart wrenching when you're young. She told me that the youthful, more sexual side of love, while important, wasn't the be all and end all. Instead, it eventually turned to friendship love. And, she added, the older you get, the more you take it for granted.

She paused.

'I experienced an enormity of jealousy at one stage of my life, which was of three and a half years' duration. It all started when my husband went to the birthday party of a friend, and my husband thought that one of the guests was very young and shapely. She was 30 years younger than him. She started to talk to him about golf. She told him

that she was dying to learn and he said, “I’ll give you some lessons if you like.” So he started to give her lessons – but not in golf.’

I can never, ever predict what I’m going to hear when I approach someone – nor do I try to. And I certainly didn’t expect to be having this conversation with Lisa.

I began by asking how she knew her husband was having an affair. In subsequent interviews where infidelity* came up (of which there were many) I always asked this question. I’m not sure whether I was trying to gather information for the purposes of this project – or to protect myself. Perhaps both. But Lisa, like the majority of people I spoke to who’d been cheated on, knew before her partner confessed. Although partners didn’t always confess, of course.

‘I guessed something was wrong, simply because my husband started doing things that he didn’t often do. He was constantly charging his mobile, always on the phone. There was a change of pattern in the time that he was coming home. The afternoon break that we usually spent together became a break where he would go off without me. He would return at seven in the evening and say, “I went to the golf club.”

‘He started to give me expensive presents. We went to the garage to get my car serviced and he promptly bought me a new one. The following year, he bought me another one. I read in a book somewhere that one of the first signs of trouble is when a husband gives expensive gifts to his wife.’

Lisa wasn’t alone in noticing changes in what had been quite routine behaviour. For most of the people I spoke to,

*You might be wondering why I’ve chosen to start with infidelity – and it’s a fair question. I think discussing infidelity is a great way of starting to explore the different types of love, as well as the distinction between love and lust.

that was the telltale sign – although the specific changes were different for each person. Marie, from Portugal, told me that her husband stopped going out with her, always using the same excuse: ‘Don’t worry, you go out without me – I think I’ll just stay in.’* Even cheaters themselves recognised a change in their behaviour. Jessie, from Hong Kong, explained: ‘Part of me thinks he knows that I have cheated. Obviously he won’t know everything and every time, but he probably had a suspicion from me going out with girlfriends, coming home really late and hiding my phone so that he couldn’t see the text messages that I was getting.’

For a few, though, there was no change – just warning signs along the way. John, from Australia, explained: ‘She kissed people on the lips in front of me. She was very close to everyone, very affectionate, and of course that would often lead somewhere. It didn’t come as a surprise when I found out that she had been cheating.’

Lisa had known her husband for a long time (they met when she was 14) and he’d had a number of affairs – although nothing ‘of any duration or seriousness’. But this time was different.

‘I could tell that this affair was vitally important to him by the way that he would quite literally run to get his phone when it made a sound. I eventually found out that, not only had it been going on for three and a half years, but it had been very serious. He had taken her to Barbados on holiday, Portugal, Spain, and all in the name of golf.

‘It was heartbreaking to find out. It hurt immensely. It took me an awful long time to get rid of the evidence, all the letters that she sent him. And it took an awful long time

* You’ll meet Marie and Jessie again in Chapter 9.

to believe anything he said ever again. I did eventually forgive and trust him again, but with difficulty.

‘I didn’t realise how seriously it had affected me. I always had a knot in my tummy. Eventually I developed a tremendous arrhythmia and lost three stone. My doctor, who knew the story, referred me to a consultant. Unbeknownst to me, she told the consultant everything and when I had my appointment, he said to me, “Your doctor tells me that you have suffered a broken heart – when your heart mends, all your symptoms will go.” I thought broken hearts were things of romance novels.’*

I asked Lisa whether she had thought about ending the marriage. She told me that she hadn’t and gave me three reasons for this decision: they had five children, they were business partners and she would hate to be lonely. Then she sat up and her voice changed, adopting a firmer tone.

‘I will say that I do know that at no time, at no time, did he stop loving me. And at no time did he ever contemplate leaving me. I would consult lots of his friends and they would say, “He’ll never leave you.” I would reply, “Well, I might leave him...” But I didn’t mean it. He is very loving to me. This morning, as I walked into the bedroom from the bathroom, he gave me a hug. Yesterday he said, as he walked through the front door, “I know what you’re going to say – and I haven’t had a drink – and I do love you very much.” And I said, “You always say that when you’ve had a drink.” He always says lovely things to me, like, “You’re a very nice person.”’

* They’re not ... Stress cardiomyopathy (or ‘broken heart syndrome’) is a recognised medical condition that can happen to people who suffer massive emotional stress. The heart muscle suddenly weakens – it’s essentially stunned – and the left ventricle (one of the heart’s main chambers) changes shape. Apparently, it feels similar to a heart attack as the main symptoms are chest pain and breathlessness.

I asked her whether she had any advice for someone who suspected that their partner was cheating on them and she thought for a moment. 'I would first establish whether the cheater was a partner or a spouse. If it was a partner who cheated, I would break away from it. Hard as it may be, if they have been cheating, and have been doing it for some time, I would say that the cheating is going to cause you an awful lot of heartbreak, so it might cause you less heartbreak to break away from it. You might say to them, "I know what's going on, I am still very fond of you, but I'm not prepared to be cheated on. Unless you're prepared to make this relationship work and give the other person up, I would suggest that the best thing we can do is go our own ways." If they love you, they will end the other relationship and come back to you.

'Once you are married, I think you have to be more tolerant of misdemeanours. You would be very lucky these days to find a marriage that doesn't involve big dips and falls and hasn't had indiscretions. Firstly, contraception is easy these days – it is much easier to have flings and go the whole way. When I was a girl you had to be very careful, whereas now you don't have to be. And even if you haven't been careful, you can take the morning-after pill. Secondly, technology means that you can discreetly keep in touch in a number of ways – with phones and texts and social media. It's much easier to hide your affairs now.'

The sun began to set and the aquamarine pool had turned purple-navy. We had both noticed the drop in air temperature and Lisa said she really should be getting home. She wished me all the best with the project before leaving. I thanked her for her honesty and watched as she walked off through the manicured trees.

And that was that. Except my conversation with Lisa stayed with me for a long time (like many interviews, I doubt it will ever leave) and for months, the idea that most

people cheat rattled around my brain like a ghost in a locker room. It also confused me. In a study, 88 per cent* believed it was morally wrong for a married person to have an affair. If most people hated infidelity, surely they wouldn't *also* be cheating?

I scoured research papers from all over the world, analysing details such as age of participant, length of relationship and gender – and, to my horror and surprise, discovered that Lisa was probably right. Infidelity is in fact very popular – but just how popular is difficult to tell.

A prolific pastime

The problem in studying infidelity is that most people don't want to admit to their indiscretions (presumably for fear of being found out, but perhaps also for fear of being judged). Maybe this goes some way to explaining why studies have found a huge range of results: depending on the study, 14–72 per cent of men and 10–70 per cent of women admit to infidelity.

The eighteenth-century philosopher David Hume did not have a particularly high opinion of women's fidelity, writing, 'What restraint ... shall we impose on women, in order to counter-balance so strong a temptation as they have to infidelity?' I have to give it to Hume as there is some truth in what he says: women, whether in gay or straight relationships, do cheat. But most studies suggest that men cheat more. Well, either that, or they're more willing to admit to it.

It's hard to get to the bottom of just how much more men cheat as it varies wildly. In one US study, 25 per cent of

* Unless there is good reason not to, I'm going to round up or down to the nearest whole number to try to keep things simple.

men admitted to it, compared with 15 per cent of women. But in another, the difference was much smaller, with 26 per cent of men and 21 per cent of women confessing.* Meanwhile, an analysis of numerous studies looking at more than 90,000 people across different countries found that more than a third of men cheated, compared with less than a quarter of women.

I should pause briefly here to point something out. Infidelity is, unhelpfully, defined differently depending on the study – some define it as kissing, others sex and some a full-blown affair. (Most do not include emotional infidelity, which I'll come on to later in the book.) This analysis of 90,000 people compared 50 different studies, many of which had different definitions of what it is to cheat. And the lack of a universal definition helps explain why different studies have dramatically different results.

In any case, most studies find that, despite cultural disapproval, cheating is still a relatively popular pastime. One of the more public confirmations of this was the Ashley Madison leak. The online dating service, marketed to people who are in committed relationships, was hacked in 2015 and the data from over 36 million users was leaked. The hack proved that the site was incredibly popular – 6 per cent of Canada's entire population (over 2 million users) and 0.05 per cent of the US (16 million users) had signed up.

Just in case that didn't fully register, that's 18 million users in the US and Canada – almost four times the entire population of New Zealand. It was particularly popular with men, who accounted for 86 per cent of users, although this may say more about how the site was marketed and the

* In this second study, men cheated with more people than women. And the numbers were higher for couples who lived together but weren't married, with 33 per cent of men and 30 per cent of women admitting to infidelity.

way people go about being unfaithful than the gender difference in doing it.

You may think that the statistics I've cited so far are astonishing, but the percentage of people cheating is likely to be much higher. There are plenty of people who are unfaithful and have not used Ashley Madison. And in a study of 7,239 men, 66 per cent of those who were married admitted to sleeping with someone other than their spouse (almost three times the 25 per cent cited in the study I mentioned earlier).*

This is an important study because, as well as being relatively large, the sample was representative of the US, which means that the characteristics of the people involved in the study match those of the US population.† Whenever academics want to study a small number of people and generalise their findings to a larger one, the ideal is to make the two groups as similar as possible. But it's hard work – it's much easier to ask undergraduates to take part in studies as a requirement of their course (which is what happens in a massive amount of research).‡ Because this study was representative of the US, it provides a particularly good

* I should add that in 3 per cent of these cases, the spouses knew about it or they had an open marriage. The percentage went up to 72 per cent for those who had been married for two years or more. I haven't provided the rates of infidelity in women in this study because the researchers didn't explore that.

† I should mention that this study is relatively old, taking place in 1981. But the sample was larger and more representative than most of the more recent studies.

‡ One more thing ... Even when a sample *is* representative of, say, the US population, those findings can only extend to the US and not to other countries, like Bhutan or Botswana. And this is a problem because 96 per cent of samples in psychological research come from Westernised countries that make up only 12 per cent of the world's population.

insight into how often infidelity is likely to be happening (at least in that country).

Research into LGBTQ+* relationships is thin on the ground, but what there is suggests that, as in heterosexual relationships, men cheat more than women. A study of 776 lesbians found that 28 per cent had slept with someone else while being in a relationship. Whereas a study of 242 gay men found that 45 per cent of those in a monogamous relationship had slept with someone else. Frequency of the rule-breaking sex ranged massively from two to 2,500 incidents.

Given that most people are reluctant to admit their infidelity, these numbers should be taken as a minimum. They should also be seen as conservative because someone may not have cheated by the time they were questioned by researchers, but might go on to later in life. What we do know is that people – both men and women – cheat, even if they – and their partner – are vehemently against it.

Despite my initial shock at Lisa's statement that I 'would be very lucky these days to find a marriage that ... hasn't had indiscretions', the numbers suggest that she was right. But whether or not she was right to stay with her partner is another question: a question that, if the data is correct, many of us may have to face.

* LGBTQ+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (people whose gender identity or expression differ from the sex they were assigned at birth) and either queer or questioning (depending on who you ask). (Some people use LGBTQIA+ which also includes intersex and either ally or asexual.)

Don't give me drugs, give me a married man

I was often surprised by – and thankful for – the trust, confidence and honesty that interviewees gave me. My aim has always been to better understand love and romantic relationships, and I was only going to achieve this if my conversations were honest and personal.

So I was very excited when I started talking to Claire in a cafe in Frankfurt.* She was in her 60s, wore thin-rimmed reading glasses and was sitting alone, reading a newspaper. She lived in Germany but was originally from the US, and the first thing she told me was that over the course of her 20s and 30s, she dated three different married men (although not at the same time).

'It all stemmed from insecurity. The only reason I went out with them is that they gave me attention and they liked me. I didn't particularly fancy people. Instead I was drawn to people that were drawn to me – that way, I could finish it whenever because I hadn't chosen them. I had such low self-esteem that I went with these married men, not thinking about their wives or their families. I would just put that to the back of my mind; I blanked it out completely. When I think about it, I didn't know who I was or what I wanted. I was just fumbling around.'

Claire clutched her coffee with both hands, deep in thought before describing the restrictions that these extra-marital relationships faced, some of which would never have crossed my mind.

'I couldn't buy for them and they couldn't buy for me. If I gave them a present they would have to go home and lie about where they got it from – and that would denigrate what I had bought. I didn't have a domestic life with them,

* Just to warn you, this chapter features more women than men, but I redress this when I revisit the subject in Chapter 9.

we didn't cook for each other, we rarely stayed overnight; in retrospect, the time together, as well as the relationship itself, was very limited, so I wasn't getting a true picture of who they were.

'When we were together, we were always watching over our shoulders to make sure that we didn't see anybody we knew. It was exciting, but on the other hand, we were living a dangerous existence. In one relationship, we had to go outside the area that we lived in because staying there was too risky as we might be seen by someone who might report back. It took a lot of energy and it was quite stressful.'

The excitement and danger that Claire talked about reminded me of a famous experiment that explored the impact of circumstance (and, in particular, fear) on how we interpret human interactions. An attractive female experimenter stopped men aged 18–35 and asked them to complete a questionnaire (she only stopped men who weren't accompanied by a female). When they had finished, she tore off a corner of the page, wrote down her name and number, and asked them to give her a call if they wanted to talk further.

Men were stopped on one of two bridges: the first was made of wooden boards attached to wire cables, which had a tendency to tilt, sway and wobble. It was 137m (450ft) long, had very low handrails and a 70m (230ft) drop to rocks and rapids below. The second was a wider and firmer bridge made of solid wood. It didn't tilt or sway, had high handrails and was 3m (10ft) above shallow water. Now here's the interesting part: men who were stopped on the wobbly bridge were more than four times as likely to call the experimenter than men stopped on the secure bridge.

These findings suggest that fear can make someone seem more attractive than they actually are, perhaps

because we attribute increased heart rate to meeting them rather than the fight or flight response caused by a wobbly bridge.* (Of course, men who chose to cross a wobbly bridge may have been more likely to be risk takers and therefore more willing to risk phoning a female they didn't know ...)

Perhaps the danger, fear and excitement that Claire felt when meeting the married men made them, and the relationship, feel all the more intense – when it was actually just the fight or flight response kicking into action because they were both worried about being caught. I wonder what they would have felt about each other had they met in the post office queue on a rainy day when they were both single.†

I asked Claire whether she loved any of them and she paused.

'There was obviously something there between us because otherwise it would not have continued. But ... I'm not sure whether I loved them – although I thought I did at the time. To be honest, I don't know whether I really knew them very well because I only saw one side of them. The whole thing was built on a lie and when something is built on a lie, it has no foundation.'

She wasn't the only person to comment on the impact of building a relationship on dishonest foundations. Ethan from Wales told me: 'Many of my relationships have started via me stealing someone or being the accomplice to cheating. In most cases, the infidelity ended their relationship and I ended up with this new woman. This is what happened with my ex – I stole her from another guy.'

* So, if you're looking for love, you could do worse than lurk, casually, on wobbly bridges, cliff edges or at theme parks in the hope that this will make you appear more alluring.

† I explore the impact of external factors like music, crowding, temperature and alcohol in Chapter 5.

She then went on to cheat on me with my best friend. I don't think I've seen the irony until now that I find it hard to trust the women that I steal, because that's how I ended up being with them – through their lying to their partner at the time.'

Claire put down her coffee, lent back in her chair and started drumming her fingers on the armrest. 'I think they were a bit bored with their lives. They had been married a while, they had kids. They each made excuses for their cheating, like, "My wife doesn't understand me," which meant that I could say, "Don't worry, I understand you." A part of me did want them to leave their wives, but in the back of my mind, I probably didn't want commitment either.* I knew that if they left their wives, that would have thrown our relationship in a completely different direction – and it probably would have ended.

'I just enjoyed it for what it was. There was a certain thrill – when we spent time together we just enjoyed it, there was something exciting about it. We were always left wanting more. I got all the thrills but without the responsibility or commitment. I didn't see them that much, so it didn't impinge on my life. When I wasn't with them, I was sort of single again, in a mirage of a world. It was quite selfish. In a way, it was like a drug to me. Don't give me cocaine, don't give me heroin, give me a married man.'

When Claire talked about the drug-like high that she experienced with these married men, it got me thinking about the huge 'highs' I had experienced when meeting certain people and just how powerful they could be. And as I went on to speak to more and more strangers, the comparison between lust (or love) and drugs came up

* Going for someone who's unavailable is a classic strategy for people with an 'avoidant attachment style' – I'll come to this in Chapter 3.

again and again. It left me wondering what was going on in the brain to cause something so potent (and often untrustworthy).

In 1954, James Olds and Peter Milner implanted electrodes in the brains of rats and allowed the animals to press a lever to receive electrical stimulation to their brains. Olds and Milner soon realised that when it caused electrical stimulation to certain parts of the brain, rats would press the lever over and over again – with one of the rats pressing a lever 7,500 times in 12 hours.

Their experiments confirmed that lurking deep within the brain were structures devoted to pleasure and reward – and further studies confirmed just how powerful these structures were. In 1965, Aryeh Routtenberg and Janet Lindy found that when offered a choice of food and water *or* electrical brain stimulation, rats opted for starvation in order to get that high.

We now know much more about the structures in the brain responsible for pleasure and reward, which are collectively known as the brain's 'reward system'. When it's activated, dopamine passes from one area to another* and our brain tells us to repeat whatever we just did to get that reward. Dopamine is essentially a messenger – a chemical that transmits signals from neurons (nerve cells in the brain) to other neurons. It doesn't know, or care, what or who caused the high; it only 'knows' that it wants the high again.

Female prairie voles who were raised in labs started to prefer one male above all others at about the same time they experienced a 50 per cent increase of dopamine. But when prairie voles were injected with something to restrict dopamine activity (a dopamine 'antagonist'), they preferred

* If you want to know more: dopamine passes from the VTA (or 'ventral tegmental area') to something that looks like a little nugget, the NAc (or 'nucleus accumbens').

the vole that happened to be around at the time, even if they hadn't mated with him before. Similarly, rats that pressed the lever over and over and over again for electrical brain stimulation lost interest when injected with a dopamine antagonist.

Research in humans has shown that we also find electrical brain stimulation in this pathway deeply pleasurable – so pleasurable that participants likened it to intense sexual orgasm, with some developing a strong romantic attraction to the researchers performing the experiments.

For ethical reasons, human research in this area has been limited* – but another study suggests that the reward system is activated when we are 'in love'. Psychologist Arthur Aron and colleagues put people in an fMRI scanner and showed them a photograph of a neutral person and the person they had 'fallen in love with' a few months earlier. When people looked at the photo of their beloved, the brain's reward system was the most active part of their brain,† and it's the brain's reward system that is activated if we take drugs.

Cocaine and amphetamines, for example, increase dopamine in the reward pathway, which is perhaps why love or lust can feel like the high you might get from using narcotics. In fact, love or lust might be even more potent. Sarah Leibowitz, a specialist in how the brain behaves when it comes to addiction, believes that while drugs can induce powerful changes in the brain, none do so as reliably or delightfully as that 'right' person.

Something else struck me about the drug-like high that Claire said she experienced with these married men: it felt

* Pesky ethics getting in the way of juicy experiments ...

† Of course, loving in real life is very different to looking at a photograph of someone you love. Love is not simply a response to a stimulus and scanning one area of the brain won't capture the complexity of what is going on – but it can give us an idea.

completely different to what is likely to have been a far less exciting love that these men may (or may not) have experienced for their wives. This is one of the reasons I decided to begin the book by exploring infidelity – it’s a fantastic way to highlight the differences between love and lust, as well as the distinct types of love.

I will explore this more in the next chapter, but for the moment, I want to make a very basic point: there are different types of love, they feel different and their underlying neurological basis is different. One type – the exciting, passionate type – engages the brain’s reward system. This love is very powerful – and deliberately so, because without it, we probably wouldn’t survive as a species.

Another type, the calmer, much less heated friendship love that Lisa mentioned, involves a different set of neurochemicals and isn’t as dominating. Instead, like friendship, this sort of love is more about companionship, respect, vulnerability and trust, as well as developing a deep knowledge of each other. This sort of love might be more concerned with sharing values than bodily fluids.

When people think and talk about infidelity, they are often comparing two very different types of love (or they may be comparing love with lust...). It’s a bit like comparing a glamorous racehorse with a trusted donkey. They’re not the same thing. What’s worse is that the glamorous racehorse is made even more alluring by the wobbly bridge effect – or in this case, the danger of getting caught. Given what it has to compete against, perhaps it’s unsurprising how often the trusted donkey loses out.

The cafe door swung open and a rush of cool air hit my face. Claire readjusted her glasses, which had slipped to the end of her nose, before telling me about her current relationship. After some therapy, she eventually stopped dating married men and finally married a kind, loving (and unmarried) man. She admitted that her feelings for him

were not as passionate as those she'd had for the married men, but, after 12 years together, she could say without doubt that she loved him. She told me that, finally, she was happy – and she seemed it.

I asked her what, if anything, she would say to her younger self. She stared out of the large coffee shop window and said: 'I was very naïve, very limited in my thinking. Thinking about it now, I find it very disrespectful. I have had a complete round turn of my view on it. If I could speak to my younger self I would say, "Don't do it – he's already been very selfish in going for you, he's being disrespectful to his wife, he's lying, he's cheating." To a certain degree, it's greed on his part. Even if he says, "I'm going to leave my wife," what are the chances that he would do the same thing to you? I would tell my younger self to say to him, "Sort yourself out and if I'm still available, then we'll take it from there. But right now, you'll actually be adding to your problems if we get together."

'There's something wrong with either you or your relationship for you to want to cheat, to want to hurt your partner – because that's what you're doing. You're cheating on them. They don't know it, but you know it, so it's on your conscience. It's not fair to anyone involved. Trust is such a major and precious thing. Once you cheat, you damage the relationship irreparably because it's like a scar. It will always be there, you will never get rid of it.

'His priority, especially if there are kids involved, will be to the wife and kids, so if you are the girlfriend, you will always come second. I think it's a losing game, even if the end result is that he leaves his wife and goes for you. Most of the time, of course, he won't, as he just won't want to make a decision.

'I would say to my younger self, "Look at what it is in you that is wanting this." Everything stems from morals and kindness. If you were being kind to yourself and to

other people, you wouldn't do these things. I wouldn't have done these things.

'But on the other hand, sometimes I wonder whether we do need to go through these things in a perverse way to develop ourselves. How else do you become who you are?'