Instructor’s Manual
for
VALUE-SENSITIVE THERAPY
with
BILL J. DOHERTY, PH.D.

Manual by
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Published by Psychotherapy.net
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Instructor’s Manual Value-Sensitive Therapy with Bill J. Doherty, Ph.D.

Cover design by by Julie Giles and Michelle Barnhardt

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Instructor’s Manual for

VALUE-SENSITIVE THERAPY
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Tips for Making the Best Use of the DVD

1. USE THE TRANSCRIPTS
Make notes in the video Transcript for future reference; the next time you show the video you will have them available. Highlight or notate key moments in the video to better facilitate discussion during and after the video.

2. FACILITATE DISCUSSION
Pause the video at different points to elicit viewers’ observations and reactions to the concepts presented. The Discussion Questions section provides ideas about key points that can stimulate rich discussions and learning. The Role-Plays section guides you through exercises you can assign to your students in the classroom or training session.

3. ENCOURAGE SHARING OF OPINIONS
Encourage viewers to voice their opinions; no therapy is perfect! What are viewers’ impressions of what works and does not work in the sessions? We learn as much from our mistakes as our successes; it is crucial for students and therapists to develop the ability to effectively critique this work as well as their own.

4. SUGGEST READINGS TO ENRICH VIDEO MATERIAL
Assign readings from Related Websites, Videos and Further Reading prior to or after viewing.

5. ASSIGN A REACTION PAPER
See suggestions in the Reaction Paper section.

6. WATCH THE EXPERTS SERIES
This video is one in a series portraying leading theories of psychotherapy and their application in work with families. Each video presents a master family therapist working with a real family who have real problems. By showing several of the videos in this Family Therapy with the Experts series, you can expose viewers to a variety of styles and approaches, allowing them an opportunity to see what fits best for them.
PERSPECTIVE ON VIDEOS AND THE PERSONALITY OF THE THERAPIST

Psychotherapy portrayed in videos is less off-the-cuff than therapy in practice. Therapists may feel put on the spot to offer a good demonstration, and clients can be self-conscious in front of a camera. Therapists often move more quickly than they would in everyday practice to demonstrate a particular technique. Despite these factors, therapists and clients on video can engage in a realistic session that conveys a wealth of information not contained in books or therapy transcripts: body language, tone of voice, facial expression, rhythm of the interaction, quality of the alliance—all aspects of the therapeutic relationship that are unique to an interpersonal encounter.

Psychotherapy is an intensely private matter. Unlike the training in other professions, students and practitioners rarely have an opportunity to see their mentors at work. But watching therapy on video is the next best thing.

One more note: The personal style of therapists is often as important as their techniques and theories. Therapists are usually drawn to approaches that mesh well with their own personality. Thus, while we can certainly pick up ideas from master therapists, students and trainees must make the best use of relevant theory, technique and research that fits their own personal style and the needs of their clients.

PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

Because this video contains actual therapy sessions, please take care to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the clients who has courageously shared their personal life with us.
Value-Sensitive Therapy and Moral Consultation

Bill J. Doherty, Ph.D.

Value-Sensitive Therapy

Value-Sensitive Therapy is concerned with the moral domain, which refers to behavior that has consequences for the well-being of others. All therapy deals in moral consultation because clients are almost always exploring their relationships with people who are affected by their decisions and action. However, mainstream psychotherapy has tended to reject the moral domain.

Since its inception, the ideal for therapy was that it be value-free and morally neutral, with therapists avoiding the use of moral language and encouraging clients not to use it themselves. When Freud created psychotherapy in the late 19th century, a conventional moral sense could be assumed in most cases. The therapist’s job was to free the individual to make authentic choices. Now, in the early 21st century, the cultural struggle against rigid moral codes has largely been won.

Family therapy was born in an era that feared the “enmeshed,” “over-controlling” family. Major emphasis was placed on individuation and differentiation, on clarifying boundaries. But in the 21st century, we see more disengaged families--not too much glue, but too little; not just over-responsibility, but also under-responsibility.

This leaves modern therapists in a bind. Inevitably, therapists are moral consultants, but we are, for the most part, without training or comfort in talking about this area. Secular therapists generally cannot appeal to traditional religious texts in a pluralistic society. Moral relativism doesn’t work either, because it ends up promoting the mainstream ethic of individual self-interest—i.e. “just be true to yourself.” Furthermore, if we engage in prescriptive moralizing with clients, we will invade their autonomy, shame them, and drive them away.
Ultimately, personal fulfillment and interpersonal and community responsibilities are seamlessly interwoven threads of human life. Therapy cannot promote one without the other. A symbolic-interactionist view of the moral sense is that it is created in everyday life through social interaction and conversation. It is communal and individual. Therapy is a form of social interaction and conversation in which moral issues and moral sensibilities in the client’s life can be explored. The therapist does not have to be an ethical expert, but rather is an ethical co-explorer and consultant.

The good news is we don’t have to start from scratch: The major world religions provide a core of moral ideas, centering on the golden rule, which undergird a community of moral discourse for most therapists and clients. Specific moral decisions, however, are often murky. The farther away we move from our own communities and cultures, the more careful we must be about our moral assumptions. For example, many cultures are far more communal and less individual-rights-oriented than mainstream American culture. Therapists can bring our moral sensibilities to the therapeutic conversation while respecting the client’s moral agency. We are accountable to our clients, to other professionals, and to our communities for the kind of moral consultation we do.

The Technique of Moral Consultation
Psychotherapy is a form of conversation, and moral consultation in psychotherapy can range from the mildest affirmations to the most intense challenges. Following are eight types of responses I have used with clients in dealing with moral issues, listed in increasing order of intensity. It is important to keep in mind that these moments of moral conversation punctuate otherwise regular clinical interactions. Some of the examples may not be consistent with every therapist’s mode of doing therapy; they are not intended to be prescriptive but rather to make more concrete the range of statements related to moral responsibility that are consistent with values-sensitive therapy.

Two important principles for the use of the model are: a) that the more intense the level of moral intervention, the stronger the empathic connection with the client must be; and b) in dealing with more than
one client in couples or family therapy, the therapist should move back and forth between perspectives of the parties involved. The eight types of responses are:

1. Validate the language of moral concern when clients use it spontaneously.
2. Introduce language to make more explicit the moral horizon of the clients’ concerns.
3. Ask questions about clients’ perceptions of the consequences of their actions on others, and explore the personal, familial, religious, and cultural sources of these moral sensibilities.
4. Articulate the moral dilemma without giving your position.
5. Bring research knowledge and clinical insight to bear on the consequences of certain actions, particularly for vulnerable individuals.
6. Describe how you generally see the issue and how you tend to weigh the moral options, emphasizing that every situation is unique and that the client will, of course, make his or her own decision.
7. Say directly how concerned you are about the moral consequences of the client’s actions.
8. Clearly state when you cannot support a client’s decision or behavior, explaining your decision on moral grounds and, if necessary, withdraw from the case.

NOTE: Most moral consultation focuses at the first three levels. With more than one family member, we can go back and forth between the members, crediting and challenging both.

I saw this is a one-time consultation, a form of what I now call “discernment counseling,” with someone on the brink of divorce. I use a more refined process now, but the essentials were in this session. If I were to have follow-up sessions, I would explore more fully the context of Jan’s dilemma in her current life, and help her be more realistic about the potential consequences for her children of her leaving her husband for her lover. I would keep the focus on this crisis in her life rather than turning it into bigger-picture therapy when the future of her marriage and family were currently on the line. I would focus the decision as whether to try an all-out effort for six months in therapy, to see if she and her husband can put new life into the marriage, after which she and he can make a another decision about staying together. If she decided to try to restore her marriage, I would invite her to bring in her husband for that work.

I learned later from Jan’s therapist that she struggled with her decision in her therapy for a few sessions, and then ended the affair after a sudden serious health crisis with one of her children became a wake-up call. She and her husband are still married and doing well a decade later.
Reaction Paper for Classes and Training

Video: Value-Sensitive Therapy with Bill J. Doherty, Ph.D

- **Assignment:** Complete this reaction paper and return it by the date noted by the facilitator.
- **Suggestions for Viewers:** Take notes on these questions while viewing the video and complete the reaction paper afterwards. Respond to each question below.
- **Length and Style:** 2-4 pages double-spaced. Be brief and concise. Do NOT provide a full synopsis of the video. This is meant to be a brief reaction paper that you write soon after watching the video—we want your ideas and reactions.

**What to Write:** Respond to the following questions in your reaction paper:

1. **Key points:** What important points did you learn about Value-Sensitive Therapy? What stands out to you about how Doherty works?

2. **What I found most helpful:** As a therapist, what was most beneficial to you about the model presented? What tools or perspectives did you find helpful and might you use in your own work? What challenged you to think about something in a new way?

3. **What does not make sense:** What principles/techniques/interventions did not make sense to you? Did anything push your buttons or bring about a sense of resistance in you, or just not fit with your own style of working?

4. **What I see differently:** What are some of your views that are different from what Doherty describes in this video? Be specific about what points you disagree with him on.

5. **Other questions/reactions:** What questions or reactions did you have as you viewed the video? Other comments, thoughts or feelings?
Related Websites, Videos and Further Reading

WEB RESOURCES

Bill Doherty’s website

www. drbilldoherty.org

National Registry of Marriage Friendly Therapists, co-founded by Dr. Doherty

www.marriageFriendlytherapists.com

Dr. Doherty discussing Marriage Friendly Therapy on youtube

www.youtube.com/watch?v=N6lZWmqLC3w

RELATED VIDEOS AVAILABLE AT WWW.PSYCHOTHERAPY.NET

Family Systems Therapy with Kenneth V. Hardy
Feminist Therapy with Lenore Walker
Harville Hendrix on the Healing Relationship with Harville Hendrix
Irreconcilable Differences: A Solution-Focused Approach to Marital Therapy with Insoo Kim Berg
She’s Leaving Me: A Four-Stage Treatment Model for Men Struggling with Relationship Loss with Steve Lerner
Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy with Sue Johnson

RECOMMENDED READINGS


Discussion Questions

Professors, training directors and facilitators may use some or all of these discussion questions, depending on what aspects of the video are most relevant to the audience.

INTRODUCTION

1. **Shoulds**: Doherty makes a distinction between “nonmoral shoulds,” such as, “I should be a lawyer because my dad is a lawyer,” and moral obligations, such as, “I should look after my frail, aging mother.” What did you think of this distinction? Do you agree or disagree with Doherty that not all “shoulds” represent an inauthentic approach to one’s life? How do you tend to respond to your clients when they “should” themselves?

2. **Reaganomics**: What do you think of Doherty’s emphasis on promoting moral responsibility? What were your reactions when he compared many types of psychotherapy to Reaganomics? Do you agree that our field has focused too much on the individual and that we need to also focus on moral interpersonal obligations to family, friends, and community? Why or why not?

3. **The myth of neutrality**: What did you think of Doherty’s point that neutrality is a myth and that therapists are always involved in influencing their clients’ decisions? Do you agree or disagree with him? What values or moral beliefs do you bring into the therapy room? How do you think your values or beliefs might influence your clients?

THERAPY SESSION

4. **Therapeutic alliance**: How successful do you think Doherty was in connecting with Jan and seeing her dilemma from her perspective? Is there anything he did in particular that you think enabled him to join with her? What might you have done differently to attempt to connect with her?

5. **Not a good girl**: What did you think of Doherty’s decision not to follow up on Jan’s statement that she used to be a good girl but was consciously choosing something different by having this affair? Would you have let that comment go or explored that
further? Overall, would you have focused more on what Jan was getting out of the affair or do you think you would have focused more, as Doherty did, on her marriage? Why? Did you think Doherty successfully honored both sides of her dilemma?

6. **Introducing the moral domain:** What did you think of how Doherty introduced the moral domain by inviting Jan to reflect on the consequences of her behavior? Was it obvious to you that Doherty is not neutral about marital commitment? Do you also have a bias towards helping married couples like Jan and Al stay together? Why or why not? Do you think that your clients are aware of biases you may have in this regard?

7. **The third island:** What did you think of Doherty’s “third island” suggestion—that Jan end her relationship with Joe, tell her husband about the affair, accept responsibility for the deception, and tell Al she wants to work with him on improving their marriage? Did you think Doherty was being too directive? Why or why not? Can you see yourself making a suggestion like his? If not, what might you have suggested?

8. **Accept responsibility:** What reactions did you have when Doherty suggested to Jan that she accept personal responsibility for the state of her marriage, by saying she’s treating her marriage like a job, telling her, “you’re pretty low-key, humdrum, and rational about all this” and, “you have a fair amount to learn”? What did you think of how he challenged her in those ways? Did you think he was too blunt? Did you get the sense that Jan was receptive to this feedback? Can you imagine yourself saying something similar to her if you were her therapist? Why or why not?

9. **Affair:** What are your overall thoughts about how Doherty approached Jan’s dilemma? If you were her therapist, how might you have handled it? Did you form any beliefs about whether Jan should stay in the marriage or end it, or were you hoping she would go in a certain direction? If you have ever worked with an individual who was having an affair, did you bring in the moral domain? Why or why not?
DISCUSSION

10. Too flagrant?: Doherty stated that, for many therapists, “dealing with value issues is like the third rail,” something that they fear and avoid. Is this true in your experience? Do you find that you try to keep your beliefs and opinions out of the therapy room, for fear of legal problems or for some other reason? Do you think Doherty was, as one audience member expressed, too “flagrant” about his values in this session? Do you think therapists should keep their values hidden? Why or why not?

11. Marriage: Doherty stated that he thinks that “we are not very much a culture that tries to support marriage” and that marriage and commitment makes people, even therapists, nervous. Do you agree with him that “we have to do a whole lot more to help people work out a relationship when they committed to it in a marriage”? Why or why not? Whether you agree or disagree with him, how do you think your beliefs about commitment and marriage influence your work with couples or individuals contemplating divorce?

12. The ‘M’ word: Many people associate the word “morals” with religion and right-wing ideology, but Doherty suggests that the culture has shifted and that “the ‘M’ word ‘moral’ is back,” and that “even the New York Times uses it in its editorials.” What associations do you have with the word “morals”? What do you think of his suggestion that therapy has to shift to include an emphasis on the moral domain?

13. The approach: What are your overall thoughts about Value-Sensitive Therapy as modeled by Doherty in this video? What aspects of his approach can you see yourself incorporating into your work? Are there some components of this approach that seem incompatible with how you work? What in particular would you do differently from Doherty?

14. Personal Reaction: How would you feel about having Doherty as your therapist? Do you think he could build a solid therapeutic alliance with you? Would he be effective with you? If you were struggling with a difficult decision in your life, would you want your therapist to explicitly address it in moral terms? Why or why not?
Role-Plays

After watching the video and reviewing *Value-Sensitive Therapy and Moral Consultation* in this manual, break participants into groups of two and have them role-play a therapy session in which the client is seeking support with a difficult decision and the therapist integrates techniques and principles from Value-Sensitive Therapy. One person will start out as the therapist and the other person will be the client, and then invite participants to switch roles. The client may discuss an actual moral dilemma in their own life, or may role-play a friend, acquaintance or a client of their own who is dealing with a difficult decision.

**INSTRUCTIONS FOR ROLE-PLAYERS:**

After the client has chosen a dilemma to focus on, therapists should invite the client to describe the issue. Therapists should focus first on joining with the client by seeing the client’s dilemma from their perspective, keeping in mind that the more intense the level of moral intervention, the stronger the empathic connection with the client must be. Next, therapists should introduce the *moral domain* by asking the client about the consequences of their behavior, introducing a question such as, “How do you see the effects of your behavior or your decision on the well-being of [use name(s) of those affected].” As the session progresses, therapists should practice some of the following eight types of responses:

1. Validate the language of moral concern when clients use it spontaneously.
2. Introduce language to make more explicit the moral horizon of the clients’ concerns.
3. Ask questions about clients’ perceptions of the consequences of their actions on others, and explore the personal, familial, religious, and cultural sources of these moral sensibilities.
4. Articulate the moral dilemma without giving your position.
5. Bring research knowledge and clinical insight to bear on the consequences of certain actions.
6. Describe how you generally see the issue and how you tend to weigh the moral options, emphasizing that every situation is unique and that the client will, of course, make his or her own decision.

7. Say directly how concerned you are about the moral consequences of the client’s actions.

8. Clearly state when you cannot support a client’s decision or behavior, explaining your decision on moral grounds and, if necessary, withdraw from the case.

After the role-plays, have the groups come together to discuss their experiences. How did participants feel engaging in the moral domain? Did the therapist’s interventions help the client come to a decision? Invite the clients to talk about what it was like to role-play the person with the dilemma and how they felt about the therapist’s interventions. Did they feel that the therapist sufficiently empathized with their dilemma and understood their perspective? Did they feel more connected to how their behaviors affect others? Then, invite the therapists talk about their experiences: How did it feel to focus on the moral domain? What was difficult or easy about helping the client with their dilemma? Finally, open up a general discussion of the strengths and the challenges in implementing Value-Sensitive Therapy.

An alternative is to do this role-play in front of the whole group with one therapist and one client; the rest of the group can observe, acting as the advising team to the therapist. Before the end of the session, have the therapist take a break, get feedback from the observation team, and bring it back into the session. Other observers might jump in if the therapist gets stuck. Follow up with a discussion on what participants learned about using Value-Sensitive Therapy.
Complete Session Transcript of
Value-Sensitive Therapy with Bill J.
Doherty, Ph.D.

Doherty: Good afternoon, Jan.
Jan: Hello.

Doherty: I wonder if you could say something about how it feels to be here today in this kind of situation, not your ordinary counseling experience.
Jan: Right. Feels a little bit public.

Doherty: Yeah, yeah, with cameras and studio—
Jan: Right.

Doherty: —and all that around. What would you like to get out of our conversation today? We have about 45 minutes to talk. We haven’t met before.
Jan: Right, we have not met.

Doherty: And what would you like to get out of our conversation?
Jan: I think I’d like to learn some things, get maybe an idea of a direction that I’d like to take with some things that I’m working on.

Doherty: Okay. A little bit about your family situation. Tell me about your—you’re married?
Jan: I’m married.

Doherty: Okay. How long have you been married?
Jan: Nineteen years.

Doherty: Okay. And children?
Jan: We have a 16-year-old daughter and a 13-year-old son.

[26:00]
Doherty: Okay. So you have a busy family?
Jan: Mostly.
**Doherty:** Okay. So tell me what specifically you’d like to get some input on from me and talk with me about.

**Jan:** Well, the dilemma that I have is that, in my marriage—it’s more of a marital thing. In my marriage, I had stopped feeling any passion. And actually, I have not had any feelings for my husband for many, many years. And so then, I have a friend who I knew for a few years. He’s a musician, and we had a pretty close friendship. And then I just—I started having a lot of feelings for him and he had lot of feelings for me. And so that kind of developed into an affair, which just began in May, and it’s been continuing all summer.

**Doherty:** Okay. So, this is something you’ve been working on with Jon in counseling—or talking about.

**Doherty Commentary:** I am referring to her current therapist, Jon, who suggested she consult with me because she was stuck in therapy over her decision.

**Jan:** Right. Right.

**Doherty:** Yeah.

**Jan:** Right. I’ve seen Jon for a long time. And I guess it was the numbness in my marriage that I was kind of reacting against, and the lack of feelings. And this person was very comfortable. And a couple years ago, we were walking down the street in during a lunch hour and he kissed me. And that felt pretty wonderful, and it was the first time in years and years and years that I can remember feeling physically passionate or—

**Doherty:** Uh-huh.

**Jan:** And so I kissed him back and it was—and then it backed off.

**[28:00]**

And it was on and off, and nothing ever happened beyond kissing and hugging for a couple years, and—

**Doherty:** Okay.

**Jan:** And I would back off and say, “I can’t do this. I can’t go there.” And then in May I decided to follow those feelings and just see where
they would lead, and that’s where they led. And so it’s been a very intense relationship.

**Doherty:** Uh-huh.

**Jan:** Very satisfying. And more recently, in fact, just this past weekend, I think he’s—he’s a 52-year-old man and he’s divorced. He was married for 25 years, and he’s—he would—I could marry him in an instant if I were to divorce my husband. There would be no question about that. But he’s feeling a little bit like second banana kind of a feeling. So I feel like he kind of broke up with me. He says he didn’t, but—so that’s—

**Doherty:** Okay. So, even more turmoil for you.

**Jan:** But now—Yeah, it’s even more turmoil. But we are still communicating. So I was feeling really a lot of pain, like—like physical pain in the pit of my stomach. It was just so painful to have that end—

**Doherty:** Yeah.

**Jan:** —so abruptly. But it’s—this past summer it’s been—all these feelings have come up, and it’s been wonderful, intense, passionate. So, that’s my situation.

**Doherty:** Yeah.

**Jan:** And I feel like there’s two roads—

**Doherty:** Okay.

**Doherty Commentary:** I’m pacing her with brief phrases to let her know I am listening.

**Jan:** —two roads that I can go down, and sometimes I feel schizophrenic in a way, because one day I’ll feel like I can divorce my husband and leave my family and follow my—follow where I feel I want to go, follow where I’m getting depth and meaning.

[30:00]

And then the very next day I’ll wake up, and it will be, “No, you can’t do that, there’s too many people you would be hurting.” I don’t really—I get along with my husband. And, actually, since—I think
he’s noticed that I’m more alive since this has been going on, and he’s become a little more—a little more open and a little more caring. So we’re—we’re actually becoming closer through this too. But I don’t want to hurt my children and—

**Doherty:** Yeah.

**Jan:** —be ostracized and all that, so—

**Doherty:** So, there’s that.

**Jan:** That’s the road that I could stay on.

**Doherty:** Yeah. Okay.

**Jan:** And this is the road that I could take that would be totally new. And I feel like, when I’m with this other person, that all the time we have isn’t—is so small, it’s such a limited amount of time. And it’s—I don’t know if this really would be true, but it feels like it would be—that what we have is just the tip of iceberg, and so it feels like I want to—I want to explore all that. And this is predictable. My husband—he’ll love me for the rest of my life. He’s not the type—he’s salt-to-the-earth kind of a guy, and I’m not worried about—I really don’t think that he would divorce me, even if he found this out. I think it would be a growing experience. He would be hurt, but...

**Doherty Commentary:** She is describing a supportive and caring husband. This is an important context that influences how I will approach my consultation with her. Some people have an affair as a way to propel themselves out of a toxic marriage. That is not the case here.

**Doherty:** So, it feels like the choice is really yours, in a way.

**Jan:** Right. Right.

**Doherty:** That’s a burden.

**Doherty Commentary:** As in all therapy, it’s important to begin with a supportive stance towards a client who you might later challenge, especially in areas that are so value-and guilt-laden as an extramarital affair.

**Jan:** Yeah, and I can’t make the—I can’t make it.

**Doherty:** Yeah.
Jan: I haven’t made it.

Doherty: Right. Yeah. So, your marriage has been not one of a lot of conflict, but in recent years, not been very joyful or passionate?

Jan: No, it’s not been.

Doherty: Was there a time when it was more so?

Doherty Commentary: This is my first question for her. I could have chosen any number of questions, some of which would have led down a path of pessimism about the marriage. For example, I could have asked “What has it been like for you to live without passion in your life?” Instead, I chose to probe for a time when the relationship was better. This is not just a clinical judgment call; it reflects a value about preserving marriages except in destructive circumstances.

Jan: I don’t remember a time when it was that, like exciting, or anything that.

[32:00]
I don’t remember that. I remember—

Doherty: Was there excitement at the very beginning of your relationship with your husband?

Doherty Commentary: Note an alternative to what I asked here: I could have reflected back that the marriage was never exciting, thereby affirming her belief that the only way forward to a life of excitement was with her affair partner. Instead, I probed for “golden age” in her relationship that showed its potential now. These therapeutic choices reflect values, not just clinical judgment, and they can have important consequences in clients’ lives. Unfortunately, clients have no way to know about the therapist’s values in advance.

Jan: Before we were married, I think.

Doherty: Okay. What was the excitement like then?

Jan: Well, I remember we met at a camp up in the Upper Peninsula, and then I—yeah, we met up there in the winter, and then I went back up. He was the camp director, and I went back up and worked there that summer, and that was the summer we fell in love. And it was like midnight canoe rides and falling in love under the stars. And that was
pretty wonderful. And then we had a long-distance relationship. We were never ever in the same place, like physically in the same location. He was up in the U.P. and I was in Chicago. And then he moved to Chicago and we broke up. This was after two years of a long-distance relationship. Then I moved to Richmond, Virginia, and we were broken up, but he didn’t date anybody else. He kept contact with me through those two years. And, then, after those two years, I had had it with the job that I had—although those were two of the best years of my life as a single person away from my nuclear family. I came back because I quit my job. I didn’t—I was teaching music and it was—I didn’t like that at all. So, I came back to Chicago and went to camp that summer. And he—we decided that we would decide marry or not marry by the end of the summer. And so by the end of the summer he had asked me to marry him, and we got married then, ten weeks later. So the only time that we ever lived in a real situation was after we got married. And the first year of our marriage was not joyful; it was very difficult. I was seeing a counselor then, and I don’t remember a lot of joy. It was comfort, and what I remember is that he’s an accepting—he accepted me for who I was, and I feel like I’ve grown—he’s given me a lot just by that acceptance of who I was.

[34:00]
So I’m very grateful to him for that. And he’s always been that way. He’s always loved me no matter what I was like. So it was a hard beginning.

Doherty: A hard beginning.

Doherty Commentary: While I keep her pace here, I’m saying to myself, “This woman is saying a lot of very positive things about her husband.”

Jan: A hard beginning.

Doherty: Okay. Love and acceptance, but what was hard? What was the hardest part?

Jan: Well, the hardest part was—he was 30 and I was 26, so I think it was mixing our singleness to be a joint venture. And we’re pretty separate. We’re pretty individualistic, and like our aloneness. So it was hard to mix.
Doherty: For both of you, or was it—

Jan: Yeah, I think so. We were both used to distance, and I think the challenge—that we’ve worked with Jon on this, and the challenge has been to have some common things that we like to do. He likes to hunt and fish and I like music. So it was hard to find things that we like to do together.

Doherty: Uh-huh. What was it like after your children, your first child was born, then?

Jan: That was a lot easier, because then we had something to focus on, and I feel like I got a lot of warmth and feelings from my children. I think that gave me the warmth that I was looking for, the closeness that I was looking for. I remember being very physical with the children until they finally told me that they didn’t want any hugs anymore, you know, when they were teenagers. So, until then I think I was getting a lot of the physical closeness with the children.

Doherty: Okay. Well, what happened to your relationship with your husband after the children were born? You said you had more to focus on, but you’re also suggesting that you weren’t as close.

Jan: I think we weren’t as close. I think we each focused on the children; we didn’t have a lot of time for ourselves. I was doing music; he was doing camping. We would kind of pass like ships in the night.

[36:00]

He would work during the day, come home, and then I would leave and go to a concert, and that was—

Doherty: Trade the kids off, so the kids got a lot of your parenting.

Jan: Yeah, the kids got a lot of us, but we didn’t get a lot of each other.

Doherty: Right. Do you think that has something to do with the decline in closeness and passion?

Doherty Commentary: Here I offer my first challenge by implicitly reframing the decline in marital closeness as normal and expected, given their focus on the children.

Jan: The decline in closeness. Yeah, oh, yeah. Definitely.
Doherty: Do you know other people who have been through this as well, that over time, especially with kids, the couple kind of distances?

Jan: Right. Yeah, I think so. And I think some of those end in divorce and I think some of them work through it and come to another level of closeness. I think that’s what I’ve seen.

Doherty: And so when you started your affair, this really rekindled some embers that had been pretty dormant for a while.

Jan: I would say those embers weren’t felt since the first summer that we were together, when we were falling in love.

Doherty: Okay. I wonder, do you see any connection between your first falling in love with your husband and what that time was like, sort of brief episodic times to be together, and your relationship with this other man, which I imagine they’re brief episodes?

Doherty Commentary: Here I begin to offer an alternative narrative to the one she is telling herself about her marriage and affair.

Jan: They’re brief episodes. Right. Right.

Doherty: Do you see any connection between those?

Jan: That they’re brief and then we’re apart, so that’s why they’re more intense, maybe?

Doherty: Could be.

Jan: It could be.

Doherty: Does that make sense to you? That’s what occurred to me as I was listening to you, that you’re—the two times you’ve described of intensity and of feeling alive were with relationships that were in the new stage, where you couldn’t really fully be together.

[38:00]

Jan: That’s true.

Doherty: And so you had these little islands, you know, flying to some tropical island to have a weekend—

Jan: Right.

Doherty: —with somebody, and then you go home and you do the
laundry, whatever.

Jan: Right, exactly. There’s been an island or two along the way, too, with—with other people. There was a person, oh, years and years ago who I had an infatuation with. So I remember that as an island of this infatuation feeling, too.

Doherty: Okay. With a man?

Jan: That wasn’t an affair or anything. That was just that feeling of infatuation.

Doherty: Right. Okay. And that was a man?

Jan: Yeah, that was a man. Yeah.

Doherty: And anybody else?

Jan: And closeness with a girlfriend now and then or with other people besides my husband.

Doherty: Uh-huh. That were these other little islands, and there’s—

Jan: Yeah, I’d say they are.

Doherty: They’re quite wonderful when you’re on it.

Doherty Commentary: I am normalizing the positive feelings she has about her affair, without shame or blame, but putting them into a relationship development context.

Jan: That’s an interesting way to look at it. Wonderful. Yes, that’s right.

Doherty: Yeah. I’m just thinking about the canoeing and the stars, you know—

Jan: Yes.

Doherty: —you were probably around some islands with your husband.

Jan: Right.

Doherty: And when you go to one of those islands and the stars are out and you’re with somebody in a fresh way, it’s very compelling. It’s very compelling.
Jan: Uh-huh.

Doherty: And there’s nothing at home that can compete with that.

Jan: No, no.

Doherty: The best marriage in the world cannot compete with that.

Doherty Commentary: I say this definitively here as a piece of relationship wisdom that it does not make sense to compare the intensity of a long-term marriage with an episodic new affair. Then I check out whether she agrees.

Jan: Okay.

Doherty: Does that make sense?

Jan: No. I wonder what, like, marriages that stay together for all these years—I mean, there’s got to be some more passion in those marriages. I think there’s—I’m missing something.

Doherty: Sure.

Jan: So I’m ready to jump the ship and find it with somebody else. No, I don’t know, because this is what mine is like. And I would think that people who stay together have more passion than I have.


Doherty Commentary: I don’t want to suggest that she has to “settle” for a passionless marriage. I want to reframe her moral dilemma, which she is framing now as having passion in her life and doing something wrong versus having no passion and doing the right thing. So I am going to suggest a third way.

[40:00]

So, one way to think of it is you have where your marriage has gotten to, which is not enough passion, not enough joy, excitement, kind of a blah. Loving but blah.

Jan: Yeah. Companionship, support, but blah.

Doherty: Okay. And a good place for your kids?

Doherty Commentary: I wanted to bring the children into the conversation because they are big stakeholders here. Contemporary
research indicates that kids in this kind of divorce—when the marriage has been basically supportive and cooperative—are the ones most damaged by divorce and its aftermath.

Jan: Right. Yeah, safe. It’s a safe place. Yeah.

Doherty: All those. And then, so this is—this is one—this is one way to be on the mainland. Okay?

Jan: The way my marriage is, the way my family is?

Doherty: Yeah, one way to be.

Jan: Okay. One way to be, okay.

Doherty: And we’ll make them all islands. Okay? That’s one kind of island, big island.

Jan: All right.

Doherty: Safe and secure, a lot of a ports. And then you have the really exotic island, smaller, that you can only stay at for brief periods of time, with a new relationship.

Jan: Okay.

Doherty: And the reason you can only stay there a brief period of time is that relationships are only new once.

Jan: Uh-huh.

Doherty: Okay? So you talked about, in terms of the tip of the iceberg, and I’m putting it as—on the island that you can only stay on for a while.

Jan: Okay. Okay.

Doherty: So, your image was—and it’s also in terms of the depth of the relationship, you’re at the tip of iceberg.

Jan: Yeah.

Doherty: But once you drill down into it, you’re in a different place because the newness is over.

Jan: Okay.

Doherty: So, the third type of island—I’m just making this up as we
go here.

Jan: Okay. Okay.

Doherty: The third type of island would be one in which you have length and depth of a relationship. You haven’t been able to stay—it’s where you have to leave—it’s where you have to leave the other, the small, exotic one, you have to leave there. You only have a visa for a short period of time for that island.

Jan: I have to leave there? Okay.

Doherty: It’s for new—

Jan: Because I can’t stay in new relationship forever.

Doherty: By definition.

Jan: So, okay.

Doherty: Yeah. Now, you can go from new relationship to new relationship and try that, but that gets pretty exhausting for most of us. And what we lack is the depth and the commitment and the time.

[42:00]

So, in some ways, if the choice seems like this blah, plain island where there’s three meals a day and there’s solidity and all that, and this exotic one that you can only stay—but this one you can stay indefinitely, this one you can only stay temporarily. Another way to think of it is, is it possible to strive for yet a third kind of island, which you would be with your husband and your kids, but one with more passion and joy and excitement?

Jan: That sounds good to me, but I don’t know how to do it.

Doherty Commentary: I have framed a third way that is not a choice between self-interest and moral responsibility—to work towards a more enlivened marriage—and she says she wants that but does not know how to do it. This is a turning point in the session that frees me up later to offer her my view of a path forward.

Doherty: Uh-huh. Why does it sound good to you?

Jan: Well, the passion. I mean, I want the passion. And I want things from both.
**Doherty:** Okay. But it can’t be like—

**Jan:** It can’t be—

**Doherty:** —that indefinitely.

**Jan:** Yes, but it has to have some of that in order to keep me there; otherwise, I’m going to be keeping on going to this other island.

**Doherty:** That’s right. Yes.

**Jan:** Right?

**Doherty:** Well, that’s the choice you make to go. I mean, some people choose to stay on the other one.

**Jan:** And I used to choose, but my whole life I chose to stay on this other island. I was a good girl.

**Doherty:** Yeah.

**Jan:** And I am not a good girl anymore. I chose to leave that and do something else and explore a different part of my psyche. This was a real definite decision to go and explore this. It wasn’t like a flippant thing at all. It was a decision to go and follow this path. But I hear you about this island thing.

**Doherty Commentary:** I chose to not follow up on the “not a good girl” statement right now, since our focus was on a consultation about her decision on her marriage. It would be grist for the therapeutic mill later. She ended with, “I hear you about this island thing,” and I chose to follow up on that comment which told me that my metaphor was working for her.

**Doherty:** Yeah. What do you hear?

**Jan:** Well, that this has to improve, that the big island has to improve, that it’s not satisfying to me. That’s what I’m hearing. But that this is going to end. Now, I could take this and move that over here, and I could make a family here. But that would turn into this.

**[44:00]**

**Doherty:** Well, it would turn into something different.

**Jan:** But this person—this person, to me, right now, my infatuation
stage, this person is like the most wonderful person in the world, like my husband was when we first—

Doherty: Yeah. Everyone on that island is wonderful.

Jan: Is wonderful. So, I think that I could just make a life with this person, and we would have this passion the rest of our lives. That’s my—I know that that’s not right, but that’s what I think, some days. And then other days I know that’s not true.

Doherty Commentary: She has accepted my reframing intervention.

Doherty: Okay. So, there are two—really, there are two parts of this one, and this is, one part is, where might you have your best chance for personal happiness and to live your life in a relationship, the next part of your life, that may give you more joy. And the other part of it is the consequences to different people.

Doherty Commentary: I now summarize the first part of the consultation, which mainly has dealt with her self-interest: her desire for both passion and stability. I then move to the more explicitly moral domain of the consequences of her decision for others in her life.

Jan: Yeah, I know, I know.

Doherty: Let’s talk about that part.

Jan: The consequences?

Doherty: Maybe we can put them back together in some place. But how do you think it would affect your children?

Jan: Oh, the consequences would be devastating.

Doherty: Yeah?

Jan: Yes. I mean, all this over here is, like, entangled with family, extended family. There’s just way entanglements, enmeshments, community. If I were to do this, go here and stay on this other island, I would be breaking a lot of things. Even career things I would be putting in jeopardy. And the relationships with my children, I think they would be hurt and they would—I mean, they would be hurt, devastated, my children—

Doherty: Okay, your children would be hurt?
Jan: Yeah, but I think they would survive.

Doherty: Sure. How would they be hurt?

Jan: Well, it just would change the family dynamics. And I think their lives would get a lot more complicated going back and forth between Mom and Dad. And I’m sure they could cope with that.

[46:00]

I think they would be hurt by my actions, that I had done something bad. And I think they might be labeled that, oh, their mother went off with this other guy, and so I think—and they’re both teenagers and very sensitive, especially my daughter. So that would not be good.

Doherty Commentary: I am aware here that she does not grasp the depth of consequence for her children.

Doherty: Yeah. How would it affect your husband?

Doherty Commentary: I realized when watching the video that never in my career had I asked this question of someone considering divorce. But it was an obvious question once I asked it. A decision about divorce is fraught with consequences for a spouse, someone whom we once promised to stay with for life and are now considering leaving. That I had never asked about effects on the spouse no doubt reflects my training in an individualistic view of the divorce decision: like a business decision where the consultant does not generally ask the client whether ending a business relationship would be bad for the business partner.

Jan: Well, believe it or not, we’ve talked about this. He didn’t know about this, but we’ve talked theoretically about it. And I also am pretty open with him about not feeling any passion for him—

Doherty: Okay.

Jan: —and not having any feelings, so he knows this. And he knows that I’m an up-and-down person. He says I’m the emotional up and down and he’s the solid, and so he’s there for me. And so when I’m up he’s there for me, and when I’m down he’s there for me. And we said, “Now, if I were to divorce you and break up the marriage, how would that affect you?” He said, “Well, I would be”—he said to me, “I would be devastated, but I would become more of a machine.” That’s what
he said, that he would become more of a machine and more of an automaton. So we have talked about that a little bit.

**Doherty:** Well, I’m glad you’ve told him that you’re not feeling satisfied.

**Jan:** Yes, I did tell him that.

**Doherty:** That’s really important. Who else would it affect?

**Jan:** It would affect my parents, his mother, his siblings, my siblings. It would affect a couple of the jobs that I do in the schools that are pretty public jobs.

**Doherty:** So there are a lot of people who are stakeholders in your marriage?

**Jan:** Yeah. And the more I think about it, I think back to our wedding, and it was a big wedding. We’re members of a small church denomination.

**[48:00]**

And there’s a lot of people that he knows. He teaches at this denominational college, and so it’s pretty widespread, people that know him and that know us.

**Doherty:** Yeah. And care about your marriage, yeah.

**Jan:** Well, I wouldn’t say they care. They would gossip about it. It would be — I don’t know that they care about it, but they—it would be grist for the gossip mills. That would be for sure.

**Doherty:** Very public.

**Jan:** It would be very public, yeah.

**Doherty:** Because you’re entrenched in a pretty broad community.

**Jan:** Yeah.

**Doherty:** So those are some pretty big consequences.

**Doherty Commentary:** Notice in the video how I pause for emphasis before this summary statement about “some pretty big consequences.” I am reflecting back and underlining the importance what she has just told me. This small intervention, like many others in the session, reflects my
values about marriage, divorce, and the stakeholders in both.

Jan: Yes, they are. And most days I know that. Most days I’m okay with that and I’m committed to staying in that situation and not breaking that up. But then there are days—and that’s what’s driving me nuts, because I can go—there will be a day, “That’s it, I’m leaving.”

Doherty: Tell me about those days. What are those days like?

Jan: When I can’t get any sharing with Al. I can’t get any, like, honest communication, and I can’t get any feelings for him, and I’m having this intense feelings thing with Joe. It’s usually after Joe and I have been together for a long time or for—in an intense way.

Doherty: Is that surprising to you, then, that would you have this? You’d be on the island.

Jan: No, no, it’s not surprising.

Doherty: You have a week on the island and then you’re back with a guy who doesn’t know that—

Jan: And he doesn’t—

Doherty: —the threat is there.

Jan: That’s right.

Doherty: And he’s doing ordinary life, and he sounds like he’s sort of a calm sea kind of guy.

Jan: Uh-huh.

Doherty: And so he’s doing his calm sea. Meanwhile, the turbulent seas and the passions and all that are over there and you come back. Whoa.

Jan: And I come back to this and I’m riled up, and he’s still just as calm, and I’m riled up.

[50:00]

And he notices something. He notices something.

Doherty: Yeah, yeah. And you’re holding a big secret.

Jan: Yes, I am.
**Doherty:** Huge secret. How does that feel to be holding that secret?

**Jan:** It’s difficult. It’s difficult. The person that would I really like to tell is, like, my daughter, because—and that feels really weird to me. But I’d like—she knows this person. She’s had conversations with him when she’s been down at the hall, and she likes him. In fact, there was a—well, never mind. But I would like to be able to share.

**Doherty:** Because—why would you want to share it with her?

**Jan:** Because she likes him, and they had a nice—

**Doherty:** How do you think she would respond?

**Doherty Commentary:** I am alarmed that she is telling herself that her daughter might approve of the affair. People having affairs and considering divorce can imagine that their children want them to be passionate and fulfilled—instead of staying and taking care of the kids in a reasonably secure home.

**Jan:** She wouldn’t be real happy. No, I wouldn’t really like to tell her. Okay. That’s right. Let me back off for a minute. But sometimes I feel—here’s a situation. I wanted to go to the Paul Simon concert this summer, and Katie, my daughter, and I were at a tape store or something. We were shopping and there was like a CD store. And we went in there, and the guy at the desk—I had just asked if he had any Paul Simon tapes, and he says, “Oh, you know, I have two tickets for the concert.” And Katie says to me, “What are you”—I said, “I’ll buy them right now. I really want to go.” And Katie says, “What are you, nuts, Mom? Who are you going to going with? Dad won’t go with you.” And she says, “Why don’t you just go with Joe.” So, here she says this, so she knows—I think she knows something. She may have some suspicions that something’s going on.

**Doherty:** But maybe one of the reasons why you have the fantasy of telling her is that you’d like to unburden yourself of this secret in your family.

**Jan:** Right. I have one friend that I talk to about this, and that’s all.

**Doherty:** Yeah. So, it’s almost like a time bomb that’s been clicking.

**Jan:** Yeah.
Doherty: Ticking in your—yeah, yeah.

[52:00] And it’s coming to a head now more because the man you’re having the affair with has sort of called your hand on this.

Doherty Commentary: I am deliberately not using the name of the affair partner because I don’t want to bring him personally into the conversation.

Jan: Yeah, he has a little bit.

Doherty: Okay. Because you spend most of your time with your family.

Jan: Yeah. He wants a little more all or nothing. He wants me all to himself or he’s going to find somebody else. And he needs to.

Doherty: That sounds fair.


Doherty: But it propels you more into a—

Jan: A dilemma.

Doherty: —dilemma.

Jan: Oh, a churning dilemma and a painful place.

Doherty: Right. I guess one of the things I’m suggesting, and I know you’ve been thinking about this is that there may be a third way between going back to your marriage as is, and leaving your marriage—leaving a husband who is a good man and a loving man.

Jan: Yes, he is. That’s why I haven’t left him, he’s a good man.

Doherty: And the two of you, it sounds like you’ve been doing a really good job with parenting, you know.

Jan: We communicate about it a lot. We share that.

Doherty: And your kids are relying on your relationship in some way—

Jan: Uh-huh.

Doherty: —you know, for a certain amount of stability in their lives.
So, there’s—there are all those reasons to, perhaps, to try a third way.

Jan: Uh-huh.

Doherty: That, although, it can’t ever compare with this new one—that’s the thing I’m adding to our conversation.

Jan: You’re telling me, okay. That’s what you’re telling me.

Doherty: That’s what I’m saying.

Jan: Yeah, it is. Okay, I believe you. I realize that.

Doherty: That—

Jan: This is what I want in the marriage, but you’re telling me, no.

Doherty: Well, no, I’m not saying no, and of course I can’t make any predictions.

Jan: Because it’s not a new—

Doherty: It’s been around a while.

Jan: Right, it’s not a new relationship.

Doherty: Yeah, but newness—we know that—

Jan: It’s not going to be a new relationship. It’s not new.

Doherty: That’s right. What we know is that all relationships that have a new, exciting phase move into a different phase. There are even different sort of brain chemicals, you know—

Jan: Yes, I know that. There are pheromones. I’ve been high on pheromones for two years, so I know all about this. Yeah.

[54:00]

Doherty: Okay. But what happens in most marriages, in my observation, and there’s research on this as well, is this over time, unless the couple finds ways to put more gas in the boat—

Jan: Right. Right.

Doherty: —gradually, they spring little leaks and they get depleted.

Jan: Right.

Doherty: And then sometimes something comes along, like happened with you with this man kissing you—
Jan: Right. Right.

Doherty: —where you sort of the get thrown out of the boat.

Jan: Yeah.

Doherty: Or you jump out of the boat. And a lot of it can be that you and your husband didn’t find ways to have the kind of energy and passion that is possible and quite fulfilling. Not the new one, but the one that after ten years or 15 years or 20 years, you say, “Wow, this is good.”

Doherty Commentary: I correct myself after saying “thrown out of the boat” to emphasize her agency—she makes choices now and in the future about her marriage.

Jan: See, I can’t believe that. It’s unbelievable to me that that’s possible.

Doherty: In your marriage?

Jan: In my marriage. Right. So, keep talking. You can tell me more how to do that.

Doherty Commentary: She is explicitly asking for me to give her input on how to save her marriage and make it a better one. Now I do so for the first time.

Doherty: Well, it would start with a very hard thing, two hard things.

Jan: What?

Doherty: You’d have to decide to let go of the other man.

Jan: Right.

Doherty: And you’d have to tell your husband that you had the affair.

Doherty Commentary: Every therapist would agree with the first “hard thing”: giving up the affair if she wants to give her marriage a chance. Telling the spouse about the affair is more controversial, and I don’t have a rule for all situations. But here I wondered if she and her husband would put the needed energy into creating a new way to be married without the truth that she had nearly left him. They had done lots of couples counseling in the past and would be candidates for drifting along making minor adjustments without the shock of revealing the affair. She had also told me that she thought her husband would handle the
news constructively, so I didn’t think her revelation would blow up the marriage.

Jan: Yeah, but they say you should never tell. If you have an affair, you should not tell.

Doherty: Okay.

Jan: Okay? Okay.

Doherty: You asked me my opinion.

Jan: All right. Okay.

Doherty: In this situation, there would be no more powerful message to your husband to communicate that you want things to be different than to say that you did something that you never thought you would do, that hasn’t been consistent with the kind of person you have been in your life.

Jan: Right. Okay.

Doherty: And that it was a wake-up call to you. You accept full responsibility for it, of course, but that you are recommitting and wanting to recommit.

[56:00]

You’re not testing him to see how he responds and then go back to the other guy if he doesn’t respond well enough. This is a scenario. You don’t have to do this.

Jan: Okay. Okay.

Doherty: But you asked me what would be the path—what would be a possible path towards a reviving of your marriage.

Jan: Yeah. Okay. I see this.

Doherty: I’m just saying this would be a path, that you definitively end the other relationship, you tell your husband. Of course, you know, you get Jon’s help and, you know, you need his assistance in this process.

Jan: Definitely.

Doherty: That you accept the responsibility for having had the affair,
for the deception, and all those things that were involved.

**Jan:** Uh-huh.

**Doherty:** And you say, “I want to work with you and I really want you to work with me on making this relationship—making the relationship next 15 years or whatever, be better for both of us.” That news that his marriage, your marriage, was at the edge of the cliff will be a wake-up call. It gives him a lot of information that he doesn’t have now. He just thinks you’re kind of up or down or, you know. He doesn’t have the information that his marriage to you and his life with you and your family together is in grave danger. It’s in grave danger.

**Jan:** No, he doesn’t think that. He thinks it’s fine. Everything’s fine.

**Doherty:** And so, naturally, he’s not going to, under these circumstances, show—he’s not going to wake up one morning and say, “You know, let’s do marriage differently. Let’s put something in there.” Because he’s moving along. Okay? He’s moving along. So, I’m not sure it would work as well if you were to end the other relationship, recommit, do it all in your mind, and then say, “I’m going the figure out a way”—which you might do, because I’ve worked with people who have done that.

[58:00]

They’ve said goodbye to what they think is the love of their life, the island that they can never return to, and then they are irritable, picky.

**Jan:** Oh, yeah. That’s how I would be. Right.

**Doherty:** Yeah. And then, of course, you bring out the worst in your husband, which then proves that you should have—

**Jan:** Then you, “I shouldn’t have ended that.”

**Doherty:** And then you call them back a month later having told yourself, “I gave this an all-out effort.” Well, the all-out effort was not involved in telling the other person what happened.

**Jan:** Right. Right. Why do some psychologists say to not tell? I mean, it was—there this thing on infidelity on one of the morning shows, and the last thing that she said—I watched that very carefully because I was really fascinated.
Doherty: Yeah.

Jan: And she says, “Whatever you do, don’t tell.” Why do they say that? That’s one idea.

Doherty: That’s one idea.

Jan: Okay. That’s one idea.

Doherty: And I don’t have any magic rules for all situations. I’m really—

Jan: Okay.

Doherty: —I’m consulting with you about your situation.

Jan: Right. That was just in her rules.

Doherty: I don’t have 100 percent for anything.

*Doherty Consultation: I’m trying to be an effective consultant who is giving his view in her situation but not suggesting that I know what’s best in every circumstance.*

Jan: Okay.

Doherty: Okay? But you want to choose a third way. You want that option anyway, okay, the option to have a third way, to be married to this man with more love and commitment and passion and excitement.

Jan: Uh-huh.

Doherty: You’d like to think it’s possible. That’s what I’m hearing.

Jan: I’d like to think it’s possible, right.

Doherty: Okay. And so then you said to me, “What are some ideas about making that possible?” That’s why.

Jan: Right. Right.

Doherty: So, I don’t have any magic rule about all this for everybody in all situations.

Jan: Right.

Doherty: But in your situation, I think that gives your husband the best chance, again, with counseling together—
Jan: I can see it, yeah.

Doherty: —to say, “Wow.”

Jan: Yeah.

Doherty: Sometimes people can make major changes when they realize they almost died of—you know, of what they were—of their smoking or, you know—that they were going along with something, and then the doctor says, “We got to get an x-ray.” And then for in 24 hours you think you have lung cancer, and then it’s not.

[1:00]

A lot of people make a shift at that point. And at least it gives them the chance to quit, or, in your husband’s case, to join you in an effort to make it better.

Jan: One of the scary things to me is if we keep going in the marriage the way it is going—and I’ll tell him this—that I’m going to leave him when the kids are in college. I said, “That’s when I’m going to get divorced. Then the purpose of our marriage will be over.”

Doherty: You’ve said that?

Jan: Yes.

Doherty: Wow.

Doherty Commentary: I intentionally signaled my amazement that she said this to her husband. This sets up a challenge I’ve been looking for an opening to make: about how little passion and energy she herself has been putting into her marriage. It’s not just that she married a stable but boring guy. She is part of the making of a blah marriage and has not been seeing her role, in part because she experiences herself as passionate in her affair. That’s one of the blind spots that affairs tend to create in people: if I am passionate and alive in my affair, the problem at home must be my spouse.

Jan: And so we can go back and forth, and—I don’t think he’s really worried about that because I’ve said it lots of times. But, you know, in joking, I’ll say, “I’m leaving you in five years, so, you know, that’s it. I’m out of here in five years.” And I’ll say, “I’m planning what I’m going to do in five years.” And we’ll just kind of joke about it. But
that’s been on the table.

**Doherty:** Wow. You know what that makes me think?

**Jan:** What?

**Doherty:** That you’ve not been putting a lot of passion into this marriage, because that’s a pretty—that sounds like somebody talking about their job, you know? “I’ll stay in a job until I get”—

**Jan:** That’s what it is. It’s like a job to me. That’s right.

**Doherty:** —“vested in my retirement plan.”

**Jan:** That’s what marriage is, it’s a job. It’s a job. You’re right.

**Doherty:** But it’s not just your husband’s lack of passion and interest. That doesn’t sound very passionately interested yourself.

**Jan:** You’re right. I haven’t put a lot of passion in because I can’t feel it. I haven’t had any feeling of passion, so...

**Doherty:** Okay.

**Jan:** So, it seems fake to me. And Jon has said, “You have to do the actions and then the feelings will come.” But I really have a hard time with that, doing the actions if I don’t feel that those actions—if I don’t have the feelings.

**Doherty:** Okay. Here’s some input I could give you about that. If you decided together—if you and your husband decide together to put something into action, it has a better chance to lead to the feelings than if you decided on your own.

[1:02:00]

Okay? If you decide to go away together to a romantic place, maybe even an island, if you decide to do something special for your anniversary, if you decide—whatever that is, to go out on dates together, and you decide together, it feels more romantic and passionate than if you decide. It often doesn’t work as well in a marriage if one person decides they’re going to start an issue and the other person doesn’t even notice.

**Jan:** Right. Well, see’s, what happened two years ago. I was reading all the books, the Harville Hendrix books. I read all those and then I
asked Al to read them with me. And we even started answering some of the questions together. It was one time he did it and then it was over. So, then I was totally—then, “Forget it. That’s it, I’m leaving you, buddy, and I’m going over here with this other relationship. I’m not getting it here.”

Doherty: That’s right. Because he’ll read.


Doherty: And people—guys always read on the island—on that island. They always read there. But most men—I hate to deal in generalizations—

Jan: Okay.

Doherty: —are not as interested as most women in those books. And a garden variety problem in marriage is the woman comes home and says, “Read this. Read this,” and it’s like an assignment, you know. And he’s not all—I mean—

Jan: He doesn’t care about it.

Doherty: —he’s interested in your marriage, but not reading about it.

Jan: No, he doesn’t care about that at all.

Doherty: So, it becomes sort of a test, right? It becomes a test of his real feelings.

Jan: And so I tested him for that.

Doherty: And he flunked.

Jan: Right. And I probably did it on purpose because I wanted to go with Joe, right?

Doherty: Yeah. Yeah.

Jan: Okay. I’ll admit that.

Doherty: And most men will flunk it, and the other guy will probably flunk it in three years.

Jan: Probably.

Doherty: Because he’ll be interested in other things as well.
Jan: Uh-huh.

Doherty: So, yeah, that’s a good insight you had.

Jan: So, that is—I put him to the test and he failed, and that gave me, like, an excuse to go and do what I wanted to do anyway.

Doherty: He didn’t know it was a test.

Doherty Commentary: People secretly considering divorce often set up “tests” for their spouse and wait for the spouse to flunk, thereby justifying a sense of hopelessness. I am challenging that here.

Jan: He didn’t know. He didn’t know, no. I concede.

Doherty: Yeah. Whereas if people know it’s a test—Now, the other problem with that is it’s you being the initiator of it.

[1:04:00]

“Here. I’ve already prescreened this. This is good. You read it and report back to me about what you learned.”

Jan: Right. Right.

Doherty: And so you’re sort of one up.

Jan: Right. Yeah.

Doherty: What I would recommend you think about doing, with Jon’s help, is to try to create what I call rituals of connection. Okay? Things that you would agree on together, like dates, like trips, like times that you would just talk personally with each other, not about logistics and other sorts of things, that you would negotiate together and both commit to, that don’t put you in the position of being the one that says, “Read this” or “Do that.” And that then gives you a chance to put something in, to be more personal. See, what it sounds like you’ve lacked is the personal part of it, the openness, the “what’s on your mind, what are you feeling, what are your dreams?”

Jan: That I haven’t shared that?

Doherty: No, no. In your marriage it sounds like you haven’t been very personal with each other. You kind of run the family together.

Jan: Right.

Doherty: With this other relationship is you’re highly personal.
Jan: Well, what happens is, I’ll say things like that and he says, “I don’t know,” or, “I don’t know.” So, we haven’t.

Doherty: Right.

Jan: So, I am more the one who initiates that kind of stuff, but it’s probably more on a testing him basis, so it’s not really that fair.

Doherty: Yeah. And you haven’t—And what I’m saying, too, is that it would be most fair to him to have maximum information now, that his marriage was on the edge of the cliff.

Jan: Totally.

Doherty: Okay? And this is a wake-up call.

Jan: Uh-huh.

Doherty: It’s not you blaming him for it or anything like that, because you have to take responsibility for your own behavior. But that gives him—it’s scary to do. It would precipitate a crisis. But then you could jumpstart that, jumpstart from that energy that would come, to seeing if it’s possible.

[1:06:00]
And that you would have a lot of changes to make because you’re pretty low key, humdrum, and rational about all this. Okay? “Once I get my retirement vestiture I’ll be out of this job.”

Jan: Uh-huh.

Doherty: It’s not terribly a romantic thing to say. Okay?

Jan: Okay.

Doherty: For a relationship you’re looking for more romance in. You know?

Jan: All right.

Doherty: So, you’d have a fair amount to learn, because you haven’t learned the skills yet, I’m suggesting, in a long-term relationship on the big island—of how to keep the joy and the excitement going. You know how to do it on the small islands, you’ve proven it. You’ve done it twice.
Doherty Commentary: I am now framing the challenge in terms of skills for having a good marriage over the long haul, skills that Jan herself, and not just her husband, needs to learn.

Jan: Right.

Doherty: But the real challenge is on the big island, where you stay, and you raise kids, and you learn to really work it out together.

Jan: What happens when the kids are not there?

Doherty: That’s when the payoff comes, because it gets better, because you have each other. That’s the payoff. That’s the payoff.

Doherty Commentary: I am thinking about my own long-term marriage. And I am offering her hope. We inevitably bring our own relationship journeys into these consultations.

Jan: That’s the payoff. I can’t visualize that. I can’t even imagine that. I just think that’s not going to—that’s not possible.

Doherty: And that’s your hopelessness. And what I’m saying is that until you have put out towards that goal and gotten off your own kind of ho-humness, you don’t know what’s possible. You can’t tell me that he won’t change unless you have really worked at changing in the relationship. If you do all that and he doesn’t change, then there’s new information, but you’re waiting for him to change.

Jan: Right. I mean, I have changed. I have gone through changes in the time that we’ve been married.

Doherty: Uh-huh. What I meant was the—

Jan: Changing in my attitude, in my behavior towards him.

Doherty: Toward, yeah, to put into the relationship. Oh, I’m sure you’ve changed and grown in a lot of ways. But I meant—

Jan: Yeah. But you mean a different kind of change?

Doherty: Yeah. I meant—

Jan: I don’t even know what that really means.

Doherty: Putting the passion, the energy, the intensity into the relationship.
Jan: How do you do that if you don’t feel it? You can’t read a book and tell you how to do it, which I tried to do and it didn’t work.

Doherty Commentary: I don’t have time in this consultation to get into this issue any further, but it’s a common challenge: how I can put energy into my marriage if I don’t “feel it?” I am mainly focusing on the difference of engaging her husband in a strong joint effort, and I am doubtful that this will happen if she does not say she nearly left him for another man. In my next statement I back up and emphasize my consultant role and her decision making role.

[1:08:00]
Doherty: Sure. No, you could use some help from Jon. And the big thing is you’d be working on it together. There’s energy that comes from two people trying at once. So, I don’t know. You have a number of decisions to make, but I’m just trying to paint some sort of—offer some sort of map of how it might be possible to get to the island, and I don’t know if it is possible. It’s not for me to decide you should do it.

Jan: Right. Right.

Doherty: But I’m trying to offer that kind of vision.

Jan: Right. Because where I am right now, it’s too divergent. It’s two roads that are definitely separate.

Doherty: Right. And this other one’s temporary.

Jan: It’s temporary?

Doherty: The other island or the other road.

Jan: Right. I didn’t understand it that way. You know, when you’re in the midst of an intense—it doesn’t seem like it’s temporary. It seems like it’s going to go on forever.

Doherty: Right. Right.

Jan: But it will not.

Doherty: Not in that way. And you will have to do the same kind of looking inside to keep that other relationship alive—

Jan: Uh-huh.
Doherty: —at some point, that you’d have to in your marriage.

Doherty Commentary: I often point out that the developmental work people have to do to have a sustained intimate relationship is something they will have to do anyway in a future relationship, and there are advantages to trying in their current relationship. She sums it up nicely in her next statement.

Jan: So, I might as well do it in my marriage, since we’ve got history in the marriage and it would be hurting so many people.

Doherty: That’s for you to decide.

Jan: That’s for me to decide. Yeah.

Doherty Commentary: I again emphasize her agency in making this decision. In my next sentence I agree with what she had just said about how the choices stack up.

Doherty: But that sure makes sense to me.

They’re giving me a sign that we’re almost out of time. So, do you want to say anything? So, we started this 45 minutes ago. We didn’t know each other. So we’ve had a fairly intense discussion.

Jan: I’d say it’s been intense.

Doherty: You’ve been very open, which I really appreciate. What do you want to say to kind of bring this to—what are you taking away from our conversation?

Jan: Well, I think what I’m taking away from it is that there’s a third choice. I was pretty locked in to there were two choices, two separate roads to take, and I think you’ve helped me to see that there might be a third.

[1:10:00]

And also, that I have some work to do myself in the marriage, that it’s not just all somebody else’s fault.

Doherty: And I think the third choice, just to reiterate this in case I didn’t make it clear—the third one doesn’t become a viable choice unless the second one is no longer in the picture.

Jan: Uh-huh. Unless the passionate—
Doherty: Unless the affair is over permanently, not in the wings. Because then it doesn’t become a third choice because you’re always back there, you know?

Jan: That’s—

Doherty: You’re setting up tests.

Jan: Right. Right. That’s going to be a major decision to make, then. Right.

Doherty: A major decision to make.

Jan: Yeah, major.

Doherty: But the only way to really move to the other island, the third island, is to leave the others behind.

Jan: Right. It’s to close the back door, which I’ve never done in my whole marriage. It’s never—there’s always been a back door, an escape hatch. So, I have to close that door. That’s very difficult to me. That’s very difficult. Is it easier for some people than other people, or is it hard for everybody?

Doherty: It differs. It differs for people. And you know it’s not closed forever, you know, it’s a matter of—

Jan: I feel like it’s a term—like a jail sentence. To close the book door, it just—

Doherty: When I work with people in your situation, and if you were making a decision to work with me and your husband, what I look for is not a forever decision. What I look for is a commitment to let the other options go—okay?—and to put in a good hunk of time to put energy into seeing if you can find a new way to be married. Not with ambivalence—


Doherty: —like, “Oh, we had a fight tonight and I’ll call my friend.” Okay? An all-out effort. Because it’s worth doing. Okay? It’d be very hard in your situation to decide that you would be married to your husband the rest of your life. That can seem like too big a decision.

Doherty Commentary: When people are on the brink of divorce, it’s
better to frame the decision in terms of a period of all-out effort for the marriage, with help, after which they will know better whether the marriage can be a lasting place for them.

Jan: Yeah, I can’t—right.

[1:12:00]

Doherty: So, it’s a smaller but nevertheless big decision, is whether you’re going to end your affair, tell your husband, and go for the third island. You know, that’s the only realistic way to think about that choice, because to think about 30 years out is just too much.

Jan: Right. I can’t make that kind of a commitment. Right.

Doherty: So, it’s short—it’s not a short term, like there’s a time limit.

Jan: Like three weeks or like three years? Like five years?

Doherty: You’d have to—

Jan: I mean, you’re not talking six weeks, you’re talking—

Doherty: No, no, no. We’re talking about—

Jan: This is not a short fix.

Doherty: That’s right.

Jan: This is a major—

Doherty: This is a major—

Jan: You don’t even know how long.

Doherty: That’s right. Yeah. That’s right.

Well.

Jan: Okay. Well, thank you.

Doherty: So, how do you feel at the end of our discussion?

Jan: Sad. I feel sad. I feel very sad because I’m so emotionally involved with this person right now. It’s so—and I don’t really want it to end. I feel sad.

Doherty: Yeah. Yeah.

Jan: But I kind of know deep down that that’s what’s going to happen. And I think I’ve pretty much told him that I’m not leaving the
marriage, so he knows that. And I don’t know why I say that because I could—that road is open. But to him, it’s—So I feel sad. I feel sad.

**Doherty:** Uh-huh. It sounds like you’re in the process of making your decision.

**Jan:** Uh-huh.

**Doherty:** Yeah. And you may feel less sad if you don’t think you’re just going back to the blahs, but that you’re really going to try to leverage this experience.

**Jan:** That there can be happiness in this other place.

**Doherty:** You can sure try. But it will take honesty, work.

**Jan:** Right.

**Doherty:** All that, on your part.

**Jan:** It will take all kinds of new things. Right?

**Doherty:** So, good luck to you.

**Jan:** Thank you.

**Doherty:** Thank you.
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Special Thanks to:

The clients for their time and their courage to share their personal stories so that others may learn.

Graduate students, Barbara Milton and Teresa Hannon, for their dedication to the success of this project.

The faculty and students in the Division of Psychology and Counseling of the College of Education at Governors State University for their participation. Addison Woodward, Chair, Division of Psychology and Counseling, and Larry Freeman, Acting Dean of the College of Education at the Governors State University for their support, participation and encouragement.

A very special thank you to Judy Fifer, Editor, Allyn & Bacon, for her courage and vision.
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