

What Makes
A BLACK MAN

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CHEAT?

Whether happily married or single and searching,
every woman wants one question answered:
Will he be faithful? >>

By Jeannine Amber Photography by Dagmara

IT STARTS AS A NAGGING **suspicion.**

Where was he last night? Why didn't he answer his phone? It eats at you until there you are, rifling through his drawers, checking his e-mails, looking for clues. They're not hard to find, and now you're ready to key his car, take a hammer to his laptop, or send a frying pan flying toward his head. You're angry, but you also want answers: Did she do things I wouldn't? Does he love her? Why wasn't I enough?

There's little in this world that can unravel a woman like knowing the man she loves is stepping out. And it's a torture many of us have endured. Only 13 percent of women we surveyed said they've never had a partner cheat on them. But why does this happen? In an unprecedented exploration of male infidelity, ESSENCE polled almost 25,000 Black men and women, assembled an insightful panel of relationship experts, and even got those affected by cheating to open up. Here, the answer to the million-dollar question: Can Black men be monogamous?

Will he cheat?

Almost **70%** of brothers think it's possible for Black men to be monogamous. But only **35%** of them say they've never cheated on a partner.

Why he cheats...

Men were more than twice as likely as women to cite **physical attraction** as the number one reason for being unfaithful.

Women, on the other hand, are nearly three times as likely as men to step out on their partners as **revenge** for being cheated on.

>> THE MARRIED MAN Karl, 38; Chicago*

I wasn't monogamous before I got married, and I knew that wasn't going to change with a ring. The first time I cheated on my wife was three months after the wedding. I didn't realize it was going to happen so soon, but I knew it was inevitable. To never have another woman touch my body for the rest of my life was just not realistic.

In my seven years of marriage, I've probably slept with about 15 or 16 different women. There is nothing my wife is doing wrong. I cheat because of sexual desire, wanting to have something different, and also to have the type of honest conversation I don't feel comfortable having with my wife. Most of the women I sleep with are in relationships themselves, so I can talk to them freely about my need to have sex outside my marriage.

The women I'm with know we need to be discreet, and I always use a condom. Most important, I don't ever let anything develop into a relationship. It's usually just a hookup in the middle of the day in my office, or when I'm traveling for work. You know how folks have 15-minute power naps to recharge? It's like that.

As long as I don't form a connection with someone else, there's nothing taking away from my relationship with my wife. I don't think our marriage would be any different if I were faithful. I'm a good husband, a good provider. I don't feel guilty, because I know my needs, and I know that having sex outside my marriage is what keeps me halfway sane.

>> THE PASTOR Reverend A.R. Bernard, 52, Christian Cultural Center; Brooklyn

I've often heard women say Black men aren't wired for monogamy. The implication is that Black women should tolerate infidelity. My response: "You don't have to settle for that!"

Even so, time and again I've seen women rationalize behavior that falls short of the ideal until unacceptable acts seem like the norm. Then they're left with relationships filled with suspicion and feelings of inadequacy. Infidelity may also bring disease or other children who will divide the man's heart, commitment, money and time.

The woman isn't the only one who suffers when a man is unfaithful. A mature man is responsible. When a man can't control himself, that takes away from his manhood.

I understand the issues and the challenges. My job is not to condemn people but to help them work through difficulties and live toward the ideal: monogamy. ▷

SAFE SEX ALERT!
53% of men say they "only sometimes" or "never" use protection when they cheat on their partner.

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What would you do if you found out your partner was cheating?

While **43% of men** and **37% of women** said they would **break up immediately** if they found out their partner was cheating, many of you had other ideas about how you'd handle the situation.

Women said:

"Stay in the marriage for the children, but cut him off."

"Find out why, then break up."

"Discover the reason, and try to work it out."

"I don't know what I'd do; it's difficult when you're married and a Christian."

Men said:

"Stay with her and treat her like a dog."

"Cheat on her too."

"Gather information and use it to destroy her."

"Confront her and him."

“I didn't approach her with the intention to be unfaithful to my girlfriend. One thing just led to another.”

—Anonymous

The Other Women

If your partner is cheating on you, chances are he's juggling more than one woman!

We asked unfaithful men how many women they're currently involved with outside of their primary relationship. Here's what they told us:

ONE WOMAN	47%
TWO TO FIVE	46%
MORE THAN FIVE	7%

basic instinct

Stay or stray? David P. Barash, Ph.D., a leading researcher in the study of fidelity, explains the impulse to have sex on the side

ESSENCE: In your book *The Myth of Monogamy: Fidelity and Infidelity in Animals and People* (W. H. Freeman), you argue that monogamy is not a natural state. What do you mean?

DAVID P. BARASH: Monogamy is exceedingly rare in the animal world. And there's no reason to believe that humans are any different, especially considering that 85 to 90 percent of human societies were not monogamous up until the last few centuries.

ESSENCE: Why do men tend to be less monogamous than women? Or is that just a myth?

BARASH: A woman can only produce offspring every nine months, but a man can father many children during that time. It's not that men are consciously thinking, *I want to have a lot of offspring*. But evolution favors projecting the maximum number of your genes into the future.

ESSENCE: Many Black men protest the idea of monogamy, insisting they need variety.

BARASH: Men want variety, they like variety, maybe they are turned on by variety. But to say they *need* it is false. I think what happens to a lot of people, men and women, is that they have this presumption that once they get married they'll sort of be set for life because they've found their perfect soul mate. Then they're blindsided when they find themselves sexually attracted to someone else. They figure, *I'm just not cut out for monogamy*. Well, no one's cut out for monogamy—that's the point. The question is, What are you going to do about it?

ESSENCE: What advice do you give people who want to be monogamous?

BARASH: Couples need to go in with their eyes open. Finding other people attractive means you're healthy; it doesn't mean you're not cut out for monogamy. Monogamy's difficult, but that doesn't mean it can't be done.

David P. Barash is a professor of psychology at the University of Washington in Seattle.

» THE PHILANDERER'S DAUGHTER Michelle, 24; Long Beach, California*

I don't believe all men cheat. Of course, my mother doesn't agree, because my father was never faithful to her. For lack of a better word, you could say he was a whore. He had two children outside their relationship that he never even had the decency to tell my mother about. Eleven years into their marriage, my mother found out through gossip in the streets that my father had a 9-year-old son. A few months later, when she was still reeling from the news, she discovered a box of receipts in the basement. It turned out my father had yet another child, a daughter, with his coworker. My father had bought this woman a house and was paying all her bills instead of taking my mother on the vacations she begged to go on. I didn't know about any of this until I was 17. That's when my parents split up.

In my family this kind of behavior goes way back. Both my grandfathers cheated, even when they were old men. At one of their funerals, a little 7- or 8-year-old boy I had never seen before got up and started talking about my grandfather, saying "my daddy" this and "my daddy" that. My grandfather was in his seventies at the time and still married to my grandmother! The whole family was just outraged.

My other grandfather was the kindest, most gentle man you could ever meet. But when he went into a nursing home, they ran some tests and discovered he had syphilis. At the same time, my grandmother went blind in one eye, and there's a good chance it was because he had passed the syphilis on to her. This man was the personification of a loving, devoted husband. It made me realize that a man can be a good husband and still cheat.

Right now, my boyfriend and I are thinking about getting married. He's ambitious, polite, loving and nothing like my father. He's one of those "What do you need, baby?" types. Of course, I don't want to be naive. I realize cheating happens. But if I felt it was inevitable, like my mother does, I wouldn't be able to have a good relationship with anybody. I think it is possible for men to be monogamous. And I want to break this cycle in my family.

WHY CHEATERS KEEP CHEATING

ESSENCE gathered a panel of experts to explore the painful cycle of infidelity in our community



ADAORA A. ADIMORA, M.D., M.P.H.
Associate professor of medicine,
University of North Carolina School
of Medicine



AUDREY B. CHAPMAN, PH.D.
Therapist, author of *Getting Good
Loving: How Black Men and Women
Can Make Love Work*
(Ballantine Books)



JEFFREY GARDERE, PH.D.
Therapist, author of *Love,
Prescription: Ending the
War Between Black Men and
Women* (Kensington)



MARC LAMONT HILL, PH.D.
Assistant professor,
urban education and
American studies,
Temple University

ESSENCE: There's a lot of talk in the Black community about our men being less monogamous than men of other races. Is there any truth to this?

ADAORA A. ADIMORA: Several professors and I recently published an analysis of data collected by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on sexual behavior. What we found is that Black and Latino men in the United States were, in fact, more than twice as likely as White men to be nonmonogamous. Probably the biggest factor contributing to this is a shortage of Black men, due to, among other things, disease and violence.

JEFFREY GARDERE: Available Black men are in demand. And when you have more women than men, the men have more options for relationships. This may be one of the reasons they choose to be nonmonogamous.

MARC LAMONT HILL: This is also about a lack of men whom women deem desirable. For example, the ratio of Black women to men in college is two to one. So if a woman wants a college-educated Black man, she's already in trouble.

AUDREY B. CHAPMAN: Black women *do* have more options. They just don't exercise them. Instead they stay in a corner and scrap over the small pool of Black men. Black women need to think about dating outside their race, about exercising a rainbow coalition.

ESSENCE: But it seems that many Black women are reluctant to do that.

HILL: Right. Our culture almost dictates that Black women's primary social responsibility is to be loyal to Black men. So where a successful Black man may feel a greater amount of leeway in terms of interracial dating and so forth, the Black woman is expected to stay. Even when the pickings are so slim, even if she ends up dealing with a man who has three women on the side.

ESSENCE: Would a woman who wants to marry and have children be less inclined to accept this?

HILL: That desire might actually make things worse. For many women, the larger society is telling her that if she's 28, 29, 30, her biological clock is ticking. So now she's thinking, *I want babies and a husband—I better find a man immediately*. She doesn't have time to see what this potential partner's prior relationship looked like or if he was faithful or dependable. She seems desperate, and his response might be, "Okay, I'll take you, but it's on my terms." Part of that might be, "I'm gonna see other women, and I may not even tell you about it."

GARDERE: There's also a certain amount of collusion going on. Some Black women give the message that "I will keep you if you go out and cheat." Men get away with this kind of behavior because they're allowed to.

ESSENCE: But why is having multiple women so desirable to men when it causes such chaos?

GARDERE: Some of this has to do with the messages society sends about what it means to be a man. Too often Black men's confidence is wrapped around their sexuality. Sex becomes a way to prove their manhood and their worth, but it's also a way to self-medicate. They deal with their hardships by overdosing on sex, if you will.

ESSENCE: Many men insist that monogamy is an unrealistic goal. Is monogamy really necessary for a healthy relationship?

GARDERE: Monogamy brings stability to a relationship. Instead of going out of the marriage and involving other people—or using other people—and avoiding issues, monogamy keeps the focus between two individuals. Monogamy is the ideal. But do we do it? No.

CHAPMAN: Infidelity will not make for a healthy, secure and safe marriage. Furthermore, it takes a terrible toll on women. Eighty percent of the people I see for counseling are complaining about some form of infidelity. Women get very angry and depressed. They don't accept sharing their man with another woman, and I don't think they ever will.

HILL: The real issue here is honesty. If a man is cheating on his wife and she doesn't know about it, then he's lying to her. In addition to that, if you have a man who's still struggling with a sense of identity that hinges upon sexual conquests, that can be very dangerous for his partner.

ADIMORA: Exactly, especially given the threat nonmonogamy poses for disease transmission, including HIV. In fact, in one study we looked at HIV-positive people whose behavior appeared low risk. They didn't smoke crack, engage in binge drinking, or have a partner who they knew to be an injection drug user. We identified that their significant risk factor was that they were in a relationship with someone who was having sex with other people. And this is not just an issue of men on the down-low either. I think a lot of times women focus on that and ignore the danger presented by their man's other female partner—his baby's mother or whomever. Monogamy is critical, and we, as Black people, are going to have to address this effectively if we're going to stay alive. ▸

What do you consider cheating?

Twice as many men as women say that oral sex doesn't count as being unfaithful.

One in four men thinks having an intimate phone call with someone outside the relationship is okay. Only one in six women agrees.

Some men had criteria all their own. Here's what they said:

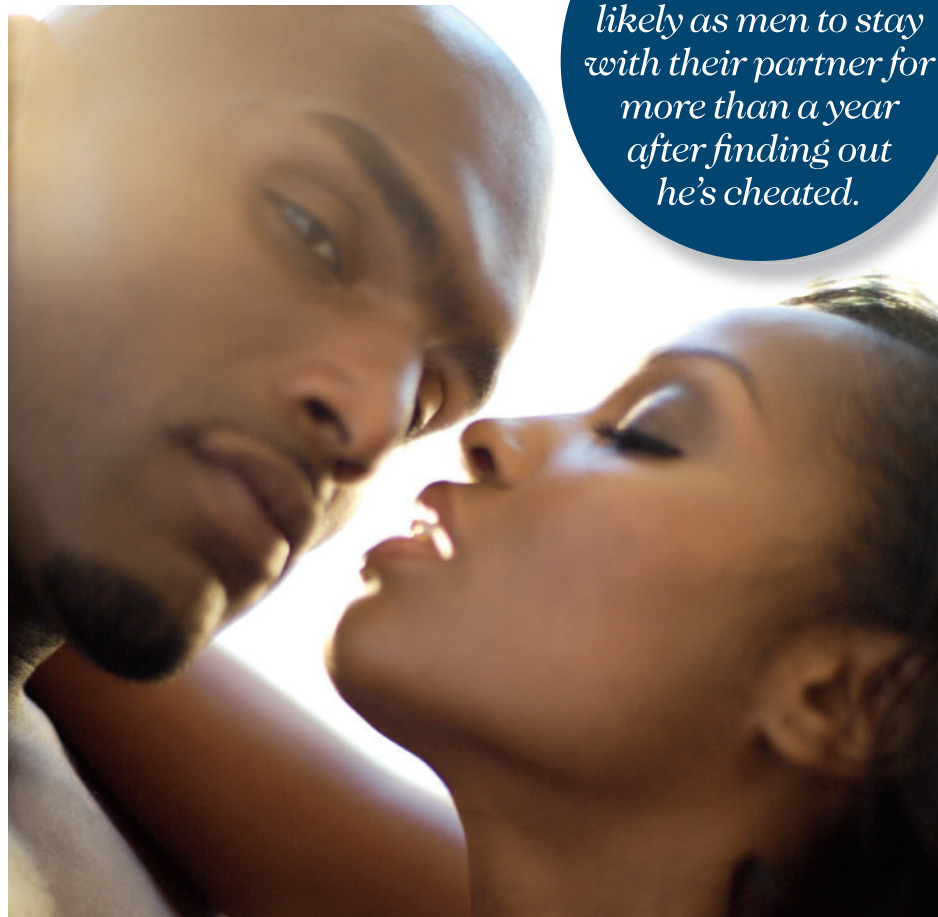
"My rule is, Don't do anything that would piss off my wife."

"Cheating doesn't include strip clubs—as long as there's no sex in the back room."

"Doing it is okay as long as you don't kiss on the mouth."

"To share my body with anyone else is not just cheating, it's an abuse of my partner's emotions."

"I'm not guilty unless she catches me with her own eyes."



Women are almost twice as likely as men to stay with their partner for more than a year after finding out he's cheated.

THE OTHER WOMAN Makeda, 32; Philadelphia*

I'm a single woman who has had many relationships with committed men, so as far as I'm concerned, there's no way you should expect a Black man to be monogamous. I know what I'm doing is messed up, and part of it is the thrill of getting a man to do something he has sworn not to do. But it's not as if I'm on a mission to seduce these guys. Some are incidental cheaters. It happens easily as we become friendly at work: I pay attention to them; I listen to them complain about their problems. They might tell themselves it's innocent, but once a man shares his emotions with you, it naturally leads to sex. Even the ones who don't mean to cheat on their wives or girlfriends are easily led astray.

Some men who get into relationships don't even plan to be monogamous; those brothers are a lost cause. Then there are others who want to be faithful, but they just can't cope with the whole marriage thing. Maybe they didn't realize how permanent marriage is or that once they are off the market, flirtation has to have boundaries. I'm sure when they first got married they were thinking, *My wife is the best thing out there*. But then time passes and they meet new women. A man needs to know how he's going to handle that; he needs a game plan to navigate this landscape of unattached fly women.

Part of the problem is just supply and demand. There are so many single Black women out here that these guys don't feel that their relationships are irreplaceable. They have this inflated sense of their own desirability and place a diminished value on women. I haven't given up on men; I just recognize their limitations.

Mo'Nique says...

"Have I cheated? Yes. But I won't make that mistake again because this time I have an 'open' marriage, meaning Sid and I express our feelings honestly and without judgment."

THE SINGLE FATHER Ross, 41; Houston

I'm a divorced father raising four boys. Two of my sons are in high school, and I see a number of kids their age who are very fast. I don't want my boys learning from their peers how to behave when it comes to the opposite sex. Teaching them what's appropriate is my responsibility.

One evening the phone rang and my 14-year-old, who's an athlete, wasn't picking it up. I asked him why, and he said, "Dad, I really don't want to talk to this girl. She's just nagging." I asked if this was his girlfriend. He said, "She's one of them." And I'm like, "What do you mean, *one* of them? You should only have one!" Then we had to have a talk about how you don't go around calling people your girlfriend because you don't know the emotions a girl might attach to that. She might be taking you seriously, and meanwhile you don't even want her calling you.

It's very important to me that my sons learn to respect women. Their mother and I aren't together, but that doesn't mean they should get a negative image of women or marriage. So I keep a firm hand on them. I want to make sure they don't have any excuses like, "I'm doing this because no one ever told me not to." I think the best way to raise my sons is by example. They don't see me disrespecting women, dating multiple women, or associating with the hoochie-mama type. They see I'm not the kind of man who's just about having a fling here and there. Not to say that I don't have opportunities. But I'm a father now. You have to put that behind you.

The other day one of my fraternity brothers came over. He's also single, and he just happened to be talking to a young lady on the phone. In my opinion, he was using an inappropriate tone. He was raising his voice, letting her know that he was setting his foot down. When he got off the phone, he looked over at my 14-year-old and said, "You don't see me talking to women like that. And you're not going to come over here anymore if you're going to take that mentality, because I don't want you trying to influence my boys." There have been plenty of times when I've pointed out other people's unacceptable behavior as a lesson to my kids. I have to. I want to be the most influential man in their lives.

Where do men meet the other woman?

online...at the club...at church...on vacation
...at a party with my wife...at the grocery store...in the street running errands...at a ball game...at the mall...on the train...in economics class...at my child's football practice...
at a barbecue...in a homeless shelter...
while sitting in traffic...at my job...while we were both patients in the hospital

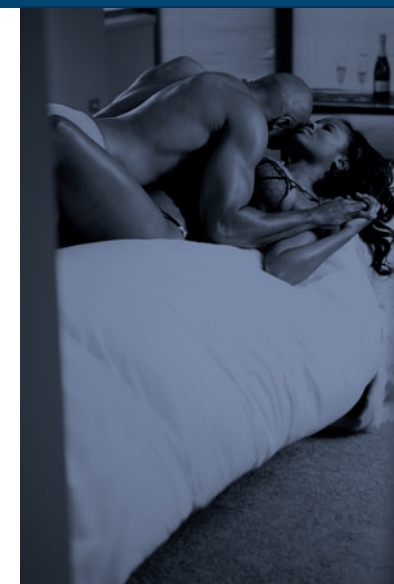
cheater, cheater

Got a man who won't stop messin' around? Here's how to get out and get on with your life

1 REALIZE YOU CAN'T CHANGE HIM. "Sometimes the fact that she can't control her man is the hardest thing for a woman to understand," says Audrey Chapman, Ph.D., author of *Man Sharing: Dilemma or Choice* (William B. Morrow & Co.). "She might feel like, 'I gave him all my love, and now he owes it to me to be faithful.' But loving somebody is not enough; they have to want to change."

2 BE SAFE. Even if your man has cheated only once, you're still in danger of contracting an STD. "Your first priority should be your own health," says Chapman. "Request that he wear a condom. He also needs to see a doctor, get tested, and show you the results." Of course, your partner might not be willing to comply, especially if he's denying the affair. In that case, the sex must cease.

3 LEAVE WITH A PLAN. If you decide to leave, be strategic about it, says Chapman. For example, you may need the advice of a financial counselor to help you determine whether you can afford to get your own place or whether you need to stay with friends or family. ▷



In what situation would you accept your partner cheating?

While most men and women say they would never accept their partner cheating, some of you gave it the green light under certain circumstances:

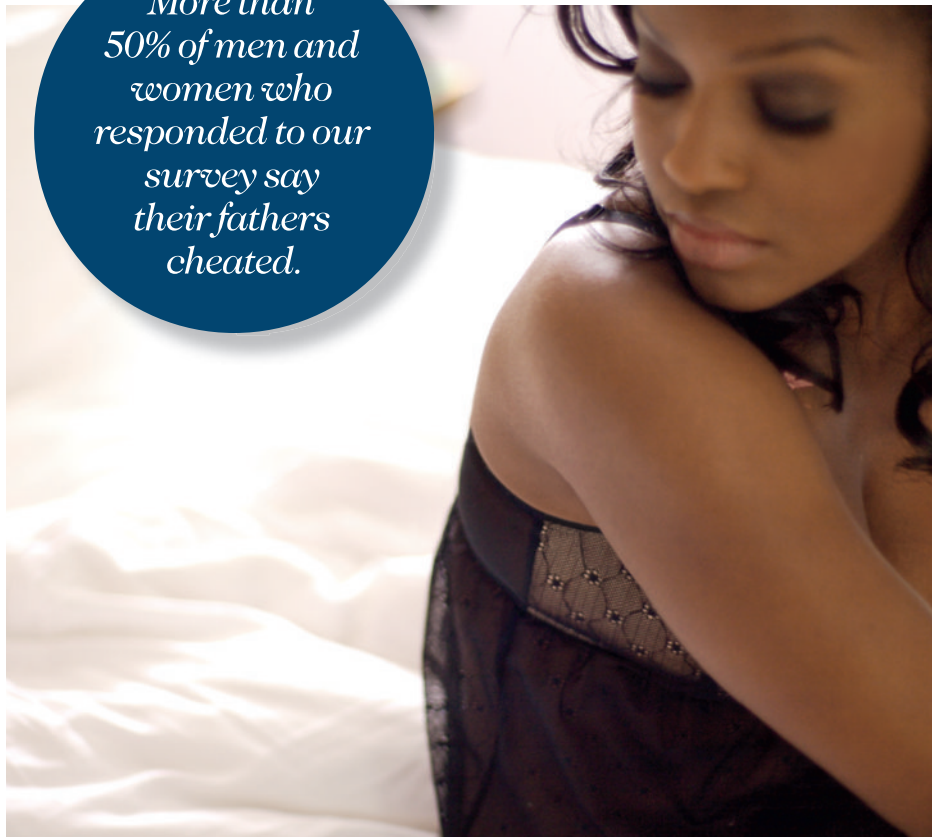
Men:

- “If I abused or neglected her.”
- “If I failed to fulfill her needs at home.”
- “If she cheated with another woman.”
- “If I was paralyzed.”
- “If she was drunk.”
- “If she was getting paid a whole lot of money.”

Women:

- “If it happened once and never again.”
- “If we both agreed to seek counseling.”
- “If there are children involved.”
- “If he is a multimillionaire.”
- “If I was in a coma.”
- “I’m getting a divorce, so I don’t care what he does anymore.”

More than 50% of men and women who responded to our survey say their fathers cheated.



» THE FAITHFUL HUSBAND Lenny, 37; Miami, Florida

From the first moment I saw my wife, I knew she was the one for me. She’s beautiful and independent. Every day I make the choice to stay faithful to her because I know what the alternative looks like: I was a player for years.

In my twenties, I worked on a cruise ship. Every week some of my coworkers and I would put \$10 each in a pot, go onto the top deck, pick a girl, and make a bet that whoever had sex with her first would get the money. Sometimes there would be a winner within a few hours. You wouldn’t know by those antics that I was actually raised to believe that a man should be with only one woman. But as you discover what’s available to you as a male, you want to experience it all. We didn’t respect the women on the ship; we just knew how to work them. What we didn’t know is that we were playing with fire.

Twice I had chlamydia, and then four friends of mine from the ship contracted HIV. For a while I thought I was infected too. It was the scariest time of my life. But it was also a turning point. I had to ask myself, *What am I doing?* Until a Black man reaches the point where he doesn’t know if he’s going to live or die based on his indiscretion, he’ll never truly appreciate how monogamy can save his life.

The kind of love I share with my wife completes me. I’m not willing to risk losing her for a fling. Still, the older I get and the more secure I become, the more available women seem to be. Yes, being faithful is a choice, but now that I’ve seen how good life is when I live by the values I was raised with, I could never go back to being a player. I have too much to lose. □

Jeannine Amber is an ESSENCE senior writer.

**Subjects’ names and identifying details have been changed.*

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Get more advice on dealing with cheaters, see extra survey results, and share your experiences with infidelity online now!

