

Why he did it

For some star athletes, marital fidelity is their biggest challenge, explains Dr Kerry Spackman

Like you, I've watched the sad downfall of a great athlete and role model as one salacious story after another is revealed about Tiger Woods' private life — a cocktail waitress here, an alleged porn star there.

Whatever the truth behind the headlines, it's something I'm all too familiar with in my work as I help a variety of world champions improve their performance.

Although most of my work focuses on improving a champion's mental and physical performance or helping them break through a barrier, about 12 per cent of elite married male athletes say remaining faithful to their wives is their most difficult battle.

Confidentiality is absolutely vital in my work, so infidelity is not something I've ever talked publicly about before. It's the best-kept secret between me and my clients.

These are tragic stories, and I feel keenly the pain inflicted on all parties. But today, I'm going to give a sneak view "behind the scenes". Why? Because dealing with this issue requires some incredibly powerful tools you may just find useful in your own life — even if you aren't tempted to have an affair.

Along the way, we'll see why "good people" can do "bad things" and why one of the most disciplined, focused and successful people in the world could have been so "undisciplined" in his private life.

What it's like to be Tiger

Before we pass judgment on any of these superstars, it's worth taking a moment to reflect on how unnatural and challenging their lives really are.

A champion like Tiger Woods doesn't just go out and play a few rounds of golf each week, then bank the tournament winnings. Instead, every waking moment is fought over by managers, agents, sponsors, journalists, trainers and coaches, all of whom want more time from him than exists in a day.

To meet these demands, his life has to be organised to the nth degree. That's before he gets around to the thousands of hours of physical training and practice that allow him to be the best in the world. It's a gruelling routine, and one he has been highly disciplined in, mentally and physically.

It's only when faced with the superhuman task of performing at world-class level, day after day, month after month, year after year, that cracks can begin to show.

Having travelled with these stars, I understand how immensely demanding it is. At the end of each day, I just wanted to hide in my hotel room and order room service.

Of course, I only experienced one per cent of what Woods does. I didn't have to face the white heat of competition and sink that winning putt, or put up with cameras watching my every move. After a week, I couldn't wait to get home. But Woods has done it, week in and week out, for 15 years.

As draining as that schedule may be, what really unbalances a superstar is that they spend their lives travelling in a "celebrity bubble" devoid of the checks and balances you and I have in our lives.

If I do something stupid, my friends are only too keen to bring me into line. But superstars are treated like gods, and it's easy to see why they're tempted to assume the "normal rules of life" don't apply to them.

And, despite being surrounded by people, they are constantly separated from genuine friends. There is a lonely life of superficial interactions.

I remember years ago watching world motor-racing champion Sir Jackie Stewart walk down a corridor late at night to his empty hotel room. We'd had yet another dinner with people we'd never see again. I



thought of how many times he must have done that and felt real sympathy for him. People like Woods or Stewart can't afford to let new people into their inner circle because everyone seems to want something.

Throw into all this a young male's sexual appetite and an endless supply of women, and it's not hard to see how it gets ever harder to resist their advances — particularly if the athlete had enjoyed casual sexual relationships before he married and the girls, often in a far-flung country, offer total discretion.

My clients desperately want to be faithful because they genuinely love their wives: they just don't have the willpower to resist the temptation. In some ways, they're like drug addicts offered free cocaine in the privacy of their hotel room. Willpower and discipline work for only so long. So what's my answer, and does it have any relevance for you?

Under the brain's hood

The first thing I explain to clients, and to someone like Tiger, is that their brain isn't like one big computer that runs a single master program.

Instead, their brain is made up of modules, each with its own agenda. Some modules are very rational and know the importance of being faithful to their partner. But buried deep in their brains are primitive circuits whose sole function, when activated, is to drive them to have sex with other women.

Even if not tempted by infidelity, we're all aware of these battles between our logical and emotional circuits. For some, it's an issue of weight loss: resisting that chocolate we know we shouldn't eat, but we want so badly. For others, it may be alcohol or drugs.

We all have different "issues" because

the balance between different circuits in our brain is unique to each of us, determined by our genes and upbringing.

Because different circuits are made up of different types of cells, alcohol dampens logical circuits while firing up emotional circuits. It's a double whammy. No wonder alcohol, bars or nightclubs are often a precursor to indiscretions, as in Tiger's case.

So what's the answer?

The starting point is to get people to acknowledge the danger they're in. They typically think of themselves as "winners", able to conquer every challenge, so under-estimate how "at risk" they are. They think each experience was a "one-off" that will never happen again — a view often compounded by aides who try to brush everything under the carpet.

The next, crucial step is to beef up and realign some emotional circuits, so the battle isn't fought by discipline and logic alone. This is different from what they've tried when they attempted to solve the problem by doubling their resolution or willpower. Relying on discipline alone is almost certain to fail in the long run because the emotional circuits are so powerful and relentless. They never give up.

Here's a simple example of how I conscripted one athlete's emotional circuits to provide back-up to his logic and discipline. It won't work for everyone, because we're all different, but illustrates the general principle.

I first put this athlete into a state of "virtual reality", using a technique I've perfected over the years. This allows me to paint images with my words that are "more real than reality"

If I painted a picture of a cold beer on a hot day by a beach, he could literally see the beads of water running down the glass and taste cold, bitter beer. It's not hypnosis, and I don't use trances or anything like that, but I do make a direct connection between my voice and their emotions. Once this connection was established, I painted a graphic, incredibly detailed image of a big 4WD.

Riding inside were his closest friends, his children and his wife. Then I painted a picture of him in a train, driving headlong towards that 4WD. This represented his infidelities, which were opposed to the family life he loved.

At this moment, everyone seemed safely separated and going about their lives: he was getting away with it. But then the train crashed into the 4WD, as it would. Now those most dear to him were flung everywhere; badly injured and bleeding to death; a slow, painful demise that could last years.

This experience had a profound impact on him. I had linked this hugely powerful, emotional experience of the train wreck and the impact it would have on those he loved, with any infidelity he might have.

I also made a CD recording of the session, so he could replay it as he travelled, allowing the connection between infidelity and a "train wreck" to be inextricably linked. No longer did he have to fight off girls with willpower alone. He literally felt and experienced each temptation differently. I've skipped lightly over the details here, but I hope you get the general idea.

I backed this up with practical advice on how to reduce exposure to temptation. Little things, like always have a "wing man" to look after you if you go into a high-risk place such as a nightclub in some exotic location. After all, if you're trying to lose weight, you don't stock the fridge with chocolate.

Like all things in life, success was only possible when he took it seriously and put in the mental training to tune his brain for success. After he did, his life was much more fun and enjoyable, as it always is when your emotional and logical circuits are aligned.

■ Neuroscientist Dr Kerry Spackman is author of the bestselling *The Winners Bible: Re-wire Your Brain for Permanent Change* (\$29.95). www.winnersbible.com

