

# Why Did Tiger Fall from Grace?

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As a clinical and sport psychologist for over 30 years who has played pretty good golf for five decades, published a book on perfectionism, and watched Tiger Woods' development from the time he was a kid, I want to look briefly at his behavior through the lens of one psychologist. How can we make sense of his fall from public grace?

I want to qualify the following by saying it is *my own speculation only* and doesn't result from personal interview with Tiger Woods or anyone close to him. While there are always dangers in attributing any kind of unconscious motivation to another's behavior, I would like to offer possible insight as to what may have influenced Tiger's thinking and behavior. What follows should not be read as excuse-making for Tiger but only an attempt to make sense of it.

Tiger is an absolute maestro in both his mental game and physical ability. But much like the production of Mozart's genius was tempered by illness and a short life, Tiger's performance could be hampered by his inability to fully focus his mind on golf rather than on family issues, as well as the negative taunting he may receive from some while playing.

There is a high-strung tuning with a perfectionist like Tiger that requires optimal conditions for best performance. Under demanding, pressurized tournament play, it doesn't take a lot to upset that mental and physical balance just enough not to come out on top. And those in the media who believe his iron-clad will to win could not possibly be thwarted by outside distractions simply underestimate the delicate nature of the tipping point that could impede his destiny.

Initial reports suggest that Tiger began his first extra-marital affair sometime during the pregnancy of his wife with their first child and shortly after the death of his father. I think both of these events are significant as catalysts for his roaming outside of his marriage. In clinical practice, it is common to hear couples date the beginning of affairs to pregnancy and the early months after child-birth. Men tend to stop seeing their wives as sexy lovers and instead view them as impending mothers. Women often lose interest in sex and become preoccupied with their changing bodies and preparing for childbirth and the mothering role.

If you add to this issue the super-charged factor of Tiger's celebrity, physical desirability to women, travel opportunity, and his own unfulfilled fantasies and temptations, it isn't difficult to see how his usual mental discipline to contain his impulses could have been severely undermined.

But what really stirred up the mix and pushed him over the edge, I believe, was the death of his father. Tiger may not have been consciously aware of how deeply he was affected by his father's death and how it may impact him. I speculate he was unconsciously "acting out" the deep loss and emptiness he felt by distracting himself with adoring women who threw themselves at him, promising solace. This isn't an uncommon way for some—men in particular—to deal with the overwhelming loss of a parent.

In the last couple of years, many in the golf media debated Tiger's growing expressions of anger after missed shots as well as what appeared to be a lack of enjoyment while playing. I viewed Tiger's striving for perfection as responsible for his temper outbursts during play. Because he could quickly recover, I saw his anger as consistent with a high-strung type that needs to allow for emotional expression and then uses the release to concentrate more intently on the next shot.

But with the recent revelations, I now think that Tiger's anger was not only an expression of his play but of a more deeply felt contradiction with which he was struggling. And that was knowing that sooner or later he was bound to have his secret life of adultery found out. He wasn't having much fun playing because he had so much going on that wasn't apparent to those watching him. Psychologically, I think he was expressing anger aimed at himself, for his own foolish decisions and the consequences he knew were coming when at some point, he would be "ratted out" by one of his girlfriends.

With all of his appearance of maturity, Tiger was still only about 31 years old when he began his affairs. He was 28 when he got married and it is unclear how much actual experience he had with women before then. How much dating did he do? How many women did he get to know? Because of his concentrated focus on golf, it is possible he did not have a number of different girlfriends and sexual partners before he got married. Or, at least enough experience to have a fighting chance of being faithful when he decided to marry.

I imagine Tiger was also influenced by the promiscuous behavior of some of his celebrity friends. After all, if all you have to do is give your wife a "Kobe special"—a "house on a finger"—how hard could it be to make things better? If money was the final arbiter, he knew the sky was the limit.

Finally, I think perhaps the single most important conscious or unconscious factor was this: Tiger had had enough of being put on a pedestal. He didn't want to be viewed as off in another world of his own like a Greek god with a higher moral structure who could walk on water. Which is damn near where we had put him after winning the U.S. Open at Torrey Pines with a bad leg.

The burden of being idolized and put above reproach, with a "perfect" life, was simply too great for him to carry. This is where so many fellow players, fans, and journalists were mistaken and ultimately let down by Tiger. So many needed to believe he could carry the weight of the image that had he and advertising people had constructed. Fans wanted to believe that he had the inner strength and moral conviction not to give in to the numerous temptations that presented themselves daily. If he could discipline his body and mind in so many other ways, they thought he would be able to do it when it came to resisting the spice of sexual intrigue and the excitement of concealment.

I imagine Tiger couldn't stand being separated out from the herd. So he did the easiest thing to prove that he was part of it. Welcome to the world of clay feet, Tiger. This doesn't not make him a "sex addict" but a man who did not have the inner strength to say "no" to temptation and opportunity.

As Nietzsche has so often been quoted as saying: "What doesn't kill you will make you stronger." I hope Tiger is able to find his way and fulfill his destiny, showing everyone in the golf world and beyond what he's capable of achieving.