

Atonement & Forgiveness in Healing Infidelity

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“Repairing an intimate relationship that has suffered betrayal is a long and tricky endeavor.”

Steven Strosny
Living & Loving After Betrayal

Infidelity constitutes a major crisis for most intimate relationships. It is common for both partners to experience an intense sense of disorientation upon the initial disclosure typically followed by varying levels of anxiety and depression. Moreover, the maelstrom of emotion experienced by the betrayed partner often resembles the post-traumatic stress symptoms of the victims of catastrophic events (Glass, 2003; Gottman & Silver, 2012; Perel, 2017). If both partners want to resolve these troublesome emotions and work toward healing their relationship, it is incumbent on the unfaithful partner to atone for his or her behavior, while it is up to the betrayed partner to work on forgiving the unfaithful partner for his or her transgressions.

Atonement

The task of atonement involves unfaithful partners completing three related tasks. First, they must take complete responsibility for their actions without blaming the infidelity on the problems in their primary relationship. This accountability typically involves unfaithful partners being able to own their infidelity as a hurtful choice they made. Although there are often genuine frustrations and problems in their primary relationship, these concerns cannot be used as justifications for making a choice to go outside their relationship in a duplicitous manner.

Second, unfaithful partners must be able to repeatedly express heartfelt remorse and take full responsibility for the hurt they have caused. Atonement cannot take place if unfaithful partners make excuses or insist that their partners accept partial blame for their infidelity. Atonement also requires that betrayed partners not shut the door on forgiveness. If they get caught up in their own hurt and anger, the couple will not be able to move forward in their relationship (Gottman & Silver, 2003).

Third, while taking personal responsibility and showing genuine remorse are essential factors, another central component of atonement is becoming more accountable. This typically involves unfaithful partners agreeing to become more transparent about interactions with all parties, websites, and software connected to their infidelity. This transparency usually entails providing their betrayed partners with open access to the electronic devices, particularly cell phones and computers, that were instrumental to their infidelity.

Forgiveness

At its core, forgiveness is the decision to let go of the anger and thoughts of retribution betrayed partners have toward their unfaithful partners. This decision is particularly challenging for betrayed partners because their sense of trust has been damaged. As a result, betrayed partners are typically wary of any apologies or reassurances that might be forthcoming from their

unfaithful partners. The betrayed partners will also be challenged in their capacity to forgive depending on their own degree of personal insecurity and the extent to which they have experienced other betrayals and attachment injuries in their past (McCullough & Hoyt, 2002; Mikulincer, Shaver, & Slav, 2006).

One of the biggest psychological difficulties that betrayed partners encounter is becoming entangled in the unfairness of the infidelity. They often move into a state of angst, concluding that since the infidelity should not have taken place, it could have been different than it was; and because it could have been different, resentment and anger are justified as preventive safeguards and/or as means of seeking retribution. Underneath it all, betrayed partners struggle to accept this injury and they often embrace interpretations of the infidelity that service their hurt and prolong their distress.

Finding resolution involves replacing these hurtful interpretations with ones that are open to more beneficial possibilities, and a recognition that since the infidelity has already taken place, there is nothing that can be done to change it. This approach, known as radical forgiveness, essentially interprets the wrong or injury as a *fait accompli* with nothing to be gained by holding on to resentment and anger. It certainly doesn't suggest or mean that betrayed partners should accept what has happened as okay, it just means they can choose to let it go if they want to achieve some resolution (Bach, 2004). By choosing to let it go, they can allow themselves to work on managing their anger and requiring more accountability, but it certainly does not have to imprison them.

Nazi concentration camp survivor Edith Eger (2017) places the task of forgiveness in context of a choice victims can make to move beyond the injustices they have experienced:

At some point we will suffer some kind of calamity or abuse, caused by circumstances [in] which we have little or no control. This is life. And it is victimization. It comes from the outside. It's the neighborhood bully, the boss who rages, the spouse who hits, the lover who cheats, the discriminatory law, the accident that lands you in the hospital. In contrast, victimhood comes from the inside. No one can make you a victim but you. We become victims not because of what happens to us but when we choose to hold on to our victimization. We develop a victim's mindset—a way of thinking and being that is rigid, blaming, pessimistic, stuck in the past, unforgiving, punitive, and without limits or boundaries. We become our own jailors when we choose the confines of the victim's mind. (pp. 7-8)

Resolution

Resolution of infidelity is hard work and takes time (Stosny, 2013). Atonement is not accomplished in one fell swoop, but is established through repetitive expressions of remorse and transparency that reestablish trust over time. Forgiveness is also a gradual process that moves through anger and resentment to various levels of acceptance and reconciliation of what was with what ought to have been. Both of these acts of healing depend upon one another. One without the other derails the healing process. Atonement fosters forgiveness and forgiveness facilitates

further atonement. Couples who are able to establish and sustain this healing dynamic can not only resolve the fallout from the infidelity, but they can also move their relationship to a more authentic level of intimacy (Gottman & Silver, 2012).

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