Infidelity in Intimate Relationships  
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After the devastating disclosure of infidelity, intense emotions and recurrent crises are the norm. The good news, however, is that the majority of couples not only survive infidelity, but therapists have observed that many relationships can become stronger and more intimate after couple therapy. An extramarital involvement is the catalyst for approximately 50% of married couples who initiate treatment. A striking paradox is that while studies indicate 90% disapproved of extramarital relationships, a national survey reported that 15% of wives and 25% of husbands had experienced extramarital intercourse. When emotional affairs or sexual intimacies without intercourse are included, the incidence increases by approximately 20%.

Causes & Types

The causes of infidelity are complex and varied. Affairs can occur in happy relationships as well as in troubled ones. Although the involved partner may not be getting enough from the relationship, sometimes the involved partner is not giving enough. Reasons for infidelity include low self-esteem, relationship deficits (e.g., lack of affection), or a social context in which infidelity is condoned.

Multiple affairs may indicate an addiction to sex, love, or romance. Love and romance addicts are driven by the passion of a new relationship. Sexual addicts are compulsively attracted to the high and the anxiety release of sexual orgasm. But such release comes with a price—feelings of shame and worthlessness. In contrast, philanderers who perceive extramarital sex as an entitlement of gender or status take advantage of opportunities without guilt or withdrawal symptoms.

Emotional attachment ranges from casual sex and "one-night stands" to long-term love affairs. Casual sexual involvement occurs more in men, whereas emotional involvement without sex is more typical among women. Extramarital emotional involvement differs from platonic friendship in that there is (1) greater emotional intimacy than in the marital relationship, (2) secrecy and deception from the spouse, and (3) sexual chemistry. Internet affairs, which cause marital distress despite lack of actual physical contact, exemplify emotional affairs. However, combined-type affairs in which extramarital intercourse occurs within a deep emotional attachment usually have the most disruptive impact.

Vulnerabilities for involvement outside the relationship can be linked to relational problems (e.g., avoidance of conflict, fear of intimacy) or life cycle changes (e.g., transition to parenthood, empty-nest). Some dissatisfied partners begin an affair as a way of exiting from an unhappy relationship. More frequently, however, the history of the relationship is re-written to justify an ongoing affair. It is unreasonable to compare a

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*This article is a condensation of the material contained in Shirley P. Glass' Not Just Friends, 2003, New York: Free Press.
Infidelity

A forbidden love affair that is maintained by romantic idealization with the routine familiarity of a long-term relationship.

The Impact of Discovery

It is common for both partners to experience depression (including suicidal thoughts), anxiety, and/or a profound sense of loss following the initial disclosure. The reactions of the betrayed partner resemble the post-traumatic stress symptoms of the victims of catastrophic events. Common reactions to the loss of innocence and shattered assumptions include obsessively pondering details of the affair; continuously watching for further signs of betrayal; and physiological hyperarousal, flashbacks, and intrusive images. The most severely traumatized are those who had the greatest trust and were the most unsuspecting. The involved partner may fear that they will be punished forever for the betrayal while they grieve for the lost dreams associated with the affair.

Treatment & Recovery

The first issue to be addressed in therapy is clarifying whether the purpose of treatment is rebuilding the relationship, resolving ambivalence about whether to remain together, or separating in a constructive way. One partner may want to reconcile while the other partner is still ambivalent or has decided to leave. I recommend working with the couple together as the primary approach. However, an ambivalent partner or a severely agitated partner may also need some individual therapy sessions.

One way to help couples rebuild relationships after the disclosure of infidelity is based on an interpersonal trauma model--a process of recovery and healing leading to forgiveness. The first stage of recovery after the impact of the disclosure establishes safety and addresses the painful emotions and traumatic symptoms. Understanding the vulnerabilities for the infidelity and telling the story of the affair comprise the middle stage. Integrating the meaning of the affair into the present and moving on into the future is the final stage of healing and forgiveness.

A wall of secrecy in the relationship and a window of intimacy in the affair usually characterize these triangles. Reconstructing the relationship requires reversing the walls and windows by erecting a wall with the affair partner and a window of honesty with the betrayed partner.

Establishing Safety. Recovery cannot begin until contact with the affair partner is terminated. Stopping an affair does not just mean ending sexual intercourse. All personal discussions, coffee breaks, and phone calls must also be stopped. When the affair partner is a co-worker, the contact must be strictly business, and necessary or unplanned encounters must be shared with the spouse in order to rebuild trust.

Telling the Story of the Affair. A guiding principle is how information will enhance healing. However, a destructive process of interrogation and defensiveness never promotes healing, even if the answers are truthful. The initial discussions
commonly resemble the adversarial interaction between a detective and a criminal. Simple facts such as who, what, where and when can be answered during the early stage to relieve some of the pressure for information. It is preferable to delay complex questions about motivations and explicit details about sexual intimacy until the process itself is more healing. The disclosure process evolves in therapy from a truth-seeking inquisition to the neutral process of information seeking--similar to a journalist and an interviewee. The final phase is one of mutual exploration with an empathic process.

**Signs of Recovery.** When the couple has worked through the affair, the following changes in the relationship are likely to have occurred: (1) the relationship is stronger and is couple-centered rather than child-centered, (2) the vulnerabilities for infidelity are understood and addressed as they occur, and 3) the couple has developed trust, commitment, mutual empathy, and shared responsibility for change.

**Bibliography**


**Internet Websites**


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