

EMOTIONAL WELLNESS MATTERS

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The Crisis of Infidelity

“There is a crack in everything;
That’s how the light gets in.”

– Leonard Cohen

The single most destructive threat to a committed relationship is when one of the partners engages in a sexual relationship with another person. This is not an uncommon event. Conservative estimates suggest that about a quarter of women, and a third of men, have violated their marital commitment to their partners. About 65 percent of marriages struck by infidelity end in divorce.

The impact on the lives of those who practice infidelity is enormous. It violates the integrity, trust, and commitment upon which marriage is based. When two people enter into a committed relationship, they make a promise to love and honor each other. This involves making a heart-felt promise to work through the problems that are sure to arise within the relationship. To break that promise means dishonoring the trust of the person who has agreed to live with you and build a life together. When an extramarital affair is discovered, a crisis ensues. Now the question is – can this relationship continue? In more than half the cases, the relationship does end – but, depending on how this crisis is dealt with by both partners, the relationship does have a chance to continue. In some cases, this relationship crisis serves as a watershed event that opens the door to self-examination and honest communication that may put the relationship on stronger ground.



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Whether infidelity leads to the negative outcome of the dissolution of the relationship or, at the other extreme, a more positive outcome with a stronger commitment and better communication depends on many factors. One important variable is whether the partner who is unfaithful came from a family with infidelity. People with parents who were unfaithful are at higher risk for infidelity within their own relationships – although this is certainly not always the case, and many people from these families are determined never to repeat their parent’s mistake. Yet we learn many things in our families of origin, and one of those is to copy the behavior of our parents – and sometimes to act out our unresolved issues.

Another factor that may determine whether a relationship can survive infidelity is the nature of the affair. Some affairs lack any emotional commitment, while others involve a deeper level of intimacy and connection than is found within the primary relationship. While a marriage or relationship may survive the former, as long as the underlying issues are brought out into the open and worked through, the latter type is not as hopeful. The couple would have to put in a great deal of work to save this relationship.

The serial affair, for example, involves many one-night stands or a series of affairs. This type of affair lacks emotional commitment and intimacy, and the motive is often sexual excitement. These affairs usually occur out of town or away from areas where friends might find out about them. A sex addiction might be present in serial affairs. Although a person who engages in serial affairs is not interested in establishing an emotional investment with his or her partners, there is also a lack of attention paid to the vow of fidelity within the primary relationship – and this is a serious issue that must be addressed if the relationship is to continue.

The more formidable threat to a primary relationship is the **romantic long-term affair**. In this case, there is an emotional commitment to an outside partner, and some of these affairs can last for several years. If the primary relationship is to have any chance of surviving, the affair should come to an end. If the affair were to continue, the straying partner would likely not have the emotional energy or motivation to repair the damage done to the main relationship. Some partners, however, allow the affair to go on and pretend not to know about it because they don’t want to end their primary relationship – but the price they pay is a high one.

Types of Affairs

There are many types of affairs, and couples should consider this information before making a decision to dissolve a marriage or other committed relationship.

Life Transitions

Relationships go through stages involving loss and then gain – and each of these transitions is accompanied by anxiety. The birth of a child, career demands, middle age, and retirement are typical life transitions that have an impact on each partner and on the relationship itself. When we enter into a committed relationship, we bring with us various idealized images of what our lives will be like and how we will relate with our partner. When these ideals are disrupted by a life transition, we experience anxiety – and sometimes one of the partners will handle the anxiety by finding a different partner, just so the ideal can be maintained. Rather than facing the anxiety, making the adjustment to the life transition, and giving up old ideals in order to make room for the new realities, a person may find a new love interest, all in a futile attempt to avoid making necessary changes.

Unrealistic Expectations

Our parents’ marriage serves as our role model for what we expect to find, or to avoid, in our own marriage. Our partners, similarly, bring their own set of expectations into the marriage – and often the two different expectations come into conflict. This conflict may not be apparent initially, but over time it becomes a major focus of the relationship. It is at this point that we may try to change the behavior of our partner so that it conforms to our own expectations. Trying to change our partner’s way of living, of course, is wrongheaded and usually only brings more conflict into the relationship. The better option is to examine our own expectations and to make adjustments in our own behavior. But this may be difficult – and some people opt to go outside of the relationship in order to find someone who meets their own expectations.

The Cry for Help

Some people have no intention of leaving their relationship, but they find themselves blocked in dealing with an unbearable aspect of the relationship. They may feel that they have exhausted all other options in trying to correct the problem, and they finally play their strongest card, which is to have an affair, and

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then let their partner know about the affair – as if to say, “See, I’ve been trying to tell you all along how much I hurt. Now do you hear me?” Rather than place the relationship in jeopardy through the acting out of frustrations, the better option is to work with a professional therapist to learn how to deal with frustration in a more productive way.

Breakdown in Communication

During the course of a relationship there are often times when the two partners stop communicating with the depth and intensity that characterized their earlier years. This could be because one partner feels that he or she has outgrown the other in terms of social activities, career advancement, emotional growth, or intellectual pursuits. Or it could be because one of the partners is geographically removed, ill, or otherwise unavailable. Or there might be a sexual dysfunction, which could be due to a physical problem or lack of communication. Rather than working on ways to enhance communication or correct the problem, one of the partners may turn outside the relationship to find another partner.

The Exit Strategy

Some people have made a decision to leave their relationship and having an affair is their strategy for making the break. They have an affair in order to make their partner angry enough to initiate the breakup. Or some may see the affair as a way of getting into therapy so that the therapist can ease the transition into the dissolution of the relationship. And some may have an affair so that they have a source of support from their new partner as they go through the leave-taking.

Life After the Affair

Although many marriages are unable to survive infidelity, some do – and many of the surviving marriages emerge stronger after the crisis of infidelity.

The first course of action when you learn about your partner’s infidelity is to find a professional therapist who can be with you as you try to cope with the emotional turmoil that accompanies this crisis. You will need to make rational decisions in a tumultuous time,

and, depending on whether your decision is to end the relationship or to salvage it, your therapist will help you to go through the stages of the decision-making process in a supportive and confidential way. Many of us have no experience in how to rebuild our lives after devastation occurs, and therapeutic support is an invaluable part of the process.

We need to examine why the affair occurred and then to make a decision about whether we feel we can remain in the relationship or not. We need to examine our partner’s motive for engaging in infidelity. We need to see how the affair is going to affect the relationship in the future, and whether we can live with that. We need to decide whether communication can be enhanced, or not, in the event that we decide to repair the problems. We need to examine both the positive and negative aspects of a divorce (in general, divorce is a profoundly painful experience for most people, including children).

Consider the following – If you are mature enough to love, you should be mature enough to live up to the demands of your commitment to your partner. Life is never perfect. “The most valuable, most enduring lesson we can learn ... is about facing our past with gratitude and our future with confidence, even as we carry with us the memories of dreams that never came true. There are other, more attainable dreams waiting for us.” (Rabbi Harold S. Kushner, in *Overcoming Life’s Disappointments*, 2006)



When the night has been too lonely
And the road has been too long
And you think that love is only
For the lucky and the strong
Just remember in the winter
Beneath the bitter snows
Lies the seed, that with the sun’s love
In the spring, becomes the rose.

– Bette Midler, from “The Rose”

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Dealing with Children in the Event of a Divorce

Children are deeply affected by their parents' divorce. They tend to handle the divorce better, however, when both parents cooperate and act in their children's best interest. Both parents should be present when the children are told, and the mood should be calm, rational, and supportive. Hostility between the parents should be avoided. They should not be told about the affair at this time. Keep in mind that children often feel responsible for their parent's divorce. They may feel that their misbehavior was the cause of the divorce. They need to be assured repeatedly, both when they are told about the divorce and then throughout the divorce process, that the divorce is not their responsibility, and that they will always be loved by both parents.

Rona Subotnik and Gloria Harris, in their book, **Surviving Infidelity**, provide guidelines for helping children through the process of a divorce –

1. Children should be told of the decision jointly by both parents without hostility or anger.
2. They should not be put in the middle of adult conflicts by telling them of the affair.
3. Children need to know they are not responsible for the breakup of the marriage.
4. Children should be told that it is the parents' decision, and they cannot change it.
5. Children need to know their parents still love them even though they no longer love each other.
6. Children should be given concrete information about how their lives will change.
7. Parents should listen to children's concerns, and try to minimize disruption in their lives.
8. Children should not be asked to take sides, carry messages, or become your confidants.
9. Children should be given permission to love and enjoy the relationship with your former spouse and his or her family. Try to find positive things to say about them.



Recommended Reading

Subotnik, Rona, and Gloria G. Harris.
Surviving Infidelity (Second Edition), 1999
224 pages, \$10.95, ISBN: 9781580621373.

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