

Infidelity: Can A Relationship Survive An Affair?

By Jerry Duberstein, Ph.D.



I was reading an article last night by a fellow psychologist on the subject of infidelity. The author is frequently seen on television and the covers of magazines dispensing his golden nuggets of wisdom. His recommendation to someone who's discovered his or her partner has cheated on them can be summed up in two words: Forgive them. The author glibly tells readers that resentment and anger are bad for your mental and physical health, so "just get over it".

Irrked, I read the article a second time, pondering the insensitivity and the blind simplicity of the guidance offered. According to this advice, people who feel

angry, hurt and betrayed by a partner's unfaithfulness are made to feel even worse for finding it hard to forgive. It reminds me of those people who tell cancer patients that their negative thinking caused their cancer. Please. Don't believe everything you read.

There are different types of infidelity: one night stands, long terms affairs, emotional infidelity/emotional abandonment, telephone sex, cyber-love, sexting and twittering. The difference lies in the degree of betrayal and deception. It can be very confusing for the innocent partner to sort through.

The One Night Stand

The one night stand may be the most benign form of infidelity. Usually the two people aren't emotionally involved. In most instances, there is no scheming, planning or manipulation to make it happen. Most often, the one night stand is a spontaneous choice to an opportunity which has presented itself. It probably isn't a reflection of the participant's love or commitment to their partner, or necessarily a barometer of marital happiness or stability. Rather, it speaks of human weakness in the face of temptation.

What drives the one night stand? People's motives are varied. Some are drawn to the thrill of danger of discovery. The taboo of the affair feeds the unparalleled excitement of risky sex with a new and different partner.

The one night stand is a unique arena where ordinary people play the ultimate high stakes gamble for momentary rewards. By their willingness to risk the

security of their relationship, they can feel the exhilaration of freedom. Ironically, this wager of what they hold dearest can, for a fleeting time, make them feel more alive.

But the experience of a one night stand is an emotional roller coaster. Once the exhilaration fades, what follows is frequently guilt and regret. The person who didn't consider the consequences of his or her actions may now feel overwhelmed by fear and shame. As a result, they may have a renewed sense of their values. Numerous clients have told me that having a one night stand served as a reminder of their priorities and with time improved their relationship.

Long Term Affairs

The long term affair is a different ball of wax. When a person maintains a secret life outside of their partner's knowledge, it is a problem of a different magnitude. The deception and emotional resources that the long term affair demands, drain the primary relationship of vitality. If the one night stand is a brief duplicity, the long term affair is a betrayal of the body, heart and soul.

The motivations for involvement in a long term affair are varied. An individual may be trying to patch together needs or wants that are unmet in their primary relationship: sexual excitement, emotional warmth, empathy, communication, and positive regard. Many people believe that an affair is preferable to divorce.

Engaging in a long term affair can be a rebellion against the constraints of monogamy. The notion that an individual is limited to a single partner is

unbearable to some. Others have the desire to think that social mores and values do not pertain to them. They want to live their lives outside the rules.

Some people simply want to have their cake and eat it too. They want the security of their relationship and the freedom/variety an affair offers. They think: why settle for one sex partner when I can have two? No one will find out.

Whatever a person's reason for having a long term affair, the impact on their primary relationship is profound. The innocent partner, if he or she is honest, usually knows of the affair but may be in denial. He or she can sense their partner isn't "all there" and is spending time and energy elsewhere.

Marriage counselors will tell you that the long term affair is a difficult hurdle to resolve. Trust in relationships is fragile. When it is breached in a flagrant or capricious manner, it is hard to earn back.

The individual involved in the long term affair would be well served to carefully examine their motivations for this involvement. The benefits of the affair should be carefully weighed against the consequences of being discovered. For some, the risk is worthwhile. For others, it is a game with diminishing rewards.

Emotional Infidelity

Emotional infidelity has all of the elements of an affair with the exception of sexual consummation. Yet even in the absence of the physical act, an "affair of the heart" can still be devastatingly destructive. These relationships cross the boundary from appropriate to titillating. They inhabit the sacred territory reserved for the couple.

Involvement in emotional infidelity is a combination of romantic feelings and sexual chemistry. In lieu of sexual connection, the participants' discussions are highly personal. They talk about their partners, problems, dreams, desires, frustrations, and secret thoughts. They flirt shamelessly, often imagining being in bed together. The lack of sexual consummation makes these interactions especially potent.

People engaged in these liaisons will deny or minimize their importance to their partner. They may be secretive and/or deceptive about the amount of time spent with the other person. They will also be evasive about the meaning of that relationship. The secretive, deceptive and evasive nature of these connections are important warning signs.

Emotional infidelity generally increases conflict between the partners in the primary relationship. This may be due to conscious or unconscious anger or the discomfort related to the knowledge of the betrayal. Many partners are unsure about their right to object to the "friendship". There may not be adequate guidelines with regard to receiving phone calls, e-mails or text messages. Conflict may also arise from the perceived changes that accompany the affair. These changes include a lower emotional availability, distraction, lessening of affection, or the partner acting guilty.

If you discover that your partner has been unfaithful, the following guidelines will help you get some perspective:

- Did you and your partner have a previous understanding about infidelity? Were they implicit or explicit? Was the subject discussed?
- If you discover that your partner has been unfaithful, take some time for reflection or consult with a therapist. Try not to make an angry or impulsive decision that you may regret in the future.
- Disregard the advice of others. Remember that no one knows you better than you know yourself.
- Are you the kind of person who over time is able to let go of anger and hurt feelings? Or do you hold onto things and expect the infidelity will taint your relationship going forward?
- **This is very important:** To what degree do you understand the infidelity. In others words, why did it happen? Was it just a mistake (a single event after too many drinks on a business trip) or was it the result of some deficit or issue in your relationship? For relationships to move forward in a positive matter, these questions must be fully explored with your partner.
- When caught, the majority of cheaters say, "It was not about you". That may or may not be true, but you need to be satisfied that your partner has told you the whole truth.
- How has your partner responded to being discovered? To what degree does he or she regret their actions? Is regret important to you?

- Only after carefully considering these questions and taking the necessary time to recover from the initial shock, is it advisable for you to explore your options with regard to the future of your relationship.
- It may be useful to see a therapist to help you process your feelings and get a grasp of these thorny issues.

*Dr. Duberstein is the author of the book, **Relationship Transformation: A Guide for Couples Who Want to Be Free and Connected**. Dr. Duberstein and his partner, Mary Ellen Goggin offer private intensive couples retreats in Portsmouth, NH.*

Learn more at www.freeandconnected.com.