

# **Infidelity**

## **Introduction**

One of the most painful events that can happen in a committed relationship such as marriage is to discover that your partner has been intimate with someone else. If this has happened to you, or you are the unfaithful partner, let me assure you that there is hope that the relationship can be restored. One of the leading therapists for infidelity states "In fact, the majority of marriages that I've treated because of infidelity have not only survived, but improved." (Lusterman, 1998). So, as stressful as infidelity is, most relationships survive it and indeed become deeper and stronger. Nevertheless the road back to a healthy relationship is not easy and requires effort by both parties. However for many couples, professional guidance and assistance is immensely beneficial.

## **Prevalence of infidelity**

The prevalence of infidelity is higher in husbands (estimates range from 21 to 44% of husbands) than in wives (12 to 25%). These figures are based on samples taken in the west and my guess is that it would even be higher for expats working away from their usual social network which usually tends to restrain infidelity. Among the local Singaporean society some men may be adhering to an outdated but stereotypical and perhaps ancient traditional image of the powerful and wealthy man being entitled to more than one sexual partner. These social and cultural influences may have to be discussed in the treatment of infidelity.

## **What is infidelity and why is it traumatic?**

Infidelity means the breaking of trust. Although it can be by one party of a relationship having a secret sexual liaison, it does not have to be actual sex. For example finding that you partner has been secretly engaging in virtual sex e.g. watching online pornography can be felt as a deep betrayal. Also it does not necessarily have to involve sex in any way; finding out of a secret emotional attachment can also be felt like a betrayal. In fact for many it is not the sexual contact but the emotional betrayal which is felt most deeply.

Trauma may be defined as an injury caused by an external event. It derives from a Greek word meaning a wound. When the trust of a relationship is broken it is like a wound or trauma to the betrayed partner.

## **What is the usual reaction to the discovery of infidelity?**

For the vast majority of us the worst possible event next to the death of our mate is finding out that they have betrayed the trust of the relationship (marriage). When the secret is revealed, often by chance, the discoverer enters a state of shock similar the trauma reaction of those who have experienced a devastating natural disaster such as an earthquake. I divide these into three phases:

- The Stress Response
- Post Traumatic Stress
- Re-organization of beliefs, attitudes, towards the relationship

### The Stress Response

The Stress Response which is also known as the "Fight, Flight or Freeze" response is relatively short lived (e.g. one to several hours) and include the following:

- physiological symptoms such as such heart pounding, a sinking feeling in the pit of the stomach
- emotional e.g. pain, anger, fear,;
- cognitive e.g. tremendous feeling of being betrayed; desire for revenge
- Behavioural reactions e.g. rage against the betraying partner, running away to one's family of origin, or complete immobility.

### The Post Traumatic Stress Phase

The Post Traumatic Stress phase which occurs in the days and months after the discovery of infidelity usually includes:

1. intrusive memories
2. emotional over-reactivity
3. a tendency to avoid anything that reminds you of the betrayal

More specifically you may experience:

- Vivid remembering of the initial revelation or imaginings associated with the infidelity. These memories can cause any of the physical reactions of the initial Stress Response including nausea or trembling.
- These intrusive memories can occur while you are awake which of course interferes with normal daily activity and making it difficult to concentrate on one's work etc. They can also take the form of nightmares which may interfere with normal sleep.
- Increased irritability over trivial annoyances
- Outbursts of rage

- Hypervigilance (always feeling on guard )
- Jumping at the slightest sudden sound etc.
- Difficulty mentally concentrating eg not being able to read a book
- Depressed feelings

It is to be noted that these symptoms while most intense in the betrayed partner may also be felt by the unfaithful partner, their children, parents, and even friends.

### Re-organization of beliefs, attitudes, towards the relationship

When we enter a love relationship e.g. a marriage or a monogamous relationship, research has shown that the features most valued are "fidelity, integrity, and feeling safe," and "permanent commitment to the marriage." (Lusterman, 2005). When infidelity is discovered, these beliefs about the relationship are shattered. The betrayed partner can initially be devastated by the revelation of infidelity and enter into a period of profound mental confusion. They may wonder about how long the person has been betraying them, the "true" nature of their unfaithful partner; about how or why their partner has done this to them; how could I have how serious a sexual transgression really is; and whether they should leave or stay and forgive.

Even more general pessimism may arise. People who have been traumatized by infidelity may also suffer a shattering of their basic assumptions about the world. Before the trauma they may have believed the world is benevolent and meaningful and that they themselves are worthy. One of the effects of trauma is to shatter these beliefs so that all three are called into question. Also they may believe that their needs are no longer being met by their mate. They may become acutely aware that they are not being treated fairly, that they have been humiliated and have lost status and power in the marriage. There may be a similar feeling about loss of status in the extended family and in society in general.

This tendency to generalize may result in wondering "If I cannot trust my mate how can I trust anyone? How can I trust in anything in life including that my job will not be terminated, that my health may deteriorate." Or one might question the utility of investing so much in the marriage or any personal relationship just to be let down so painfully. Life, in general, begins to appear as meaningless. The betrayed partner may start to ask "For my partner to hurt me so much I must be of no value to him and to anyone else too. I am of no value in society."

There may be a sense that of being absolutely alone in the suffering and realizing that something terrible and irreversible has happened to what we held dearest. We feel alone since no one came to our rescue. If

we have some spiritual beliefs, which may be at an conscious level, we wonder how our spiritual caretaker could let this terrible humiliation and betrayal occur to us.

I have listed these possible cognitive reactions to assure you that they are normal responses to infidelity and that they do not indicate necessarily that your marriage is ended. In fact as I said above most relationships do survive infidelity!

### **How to tell if you need professional help**

The various symptoms described above are normal initial thoughts for someone who has experienced infidelity but if they persist over a long period of time e.g. two to six months or longer, or are so severe as to be incapacitating and preventing the healing process from taking place, then it would be beneficial to seek help from a clinical psychologist or other qualified professional. Another reason for seeking help is if either partner suffers from some psychological problems such as depression or a condition such as ADHD which may complicate the resolution of the infidelity

### **How therapy works**

Therapy can be divided into the following phases:

- Relieving or reducing the PTSD of the betrayed partner and the stressful state of the unfaithful partner so that they both can start the process of reconciliation and healing
- Re-establishing trust and willingness required to work on the marriage and improve it: One of the first steps here is that the offending partner is encouraged and taught how to validate the feelings and thoughts of the discoverer.
- Assessment of the marriage as it was before the infidelity for its strengths and weaknesses
- Using this assessment to pinpoint marital weaknesses and then improving the marriage in various ways e.g. learning how to improve the sexual aspect of the marriage
- Developing ways of preventing infidelity in the future
- Maintenance of a healthy mutually rewarding relationship

### **References and resources**

Lusterman, Don-David (2005) "Treatment of Marital Infidelity" A NICHE PRACTICE SPECIFICATIONS: Treatment of Marital Infidelity available from Psychologists in Independent Practice.

Lusterman, Don-David. 1998. Infidelity: A Survival Guide. Oakland, CA.: New harbinger Publications, Inc.

**Smart Marriage** website at [www.smartmarriages.com](http://www.smartmarriages.com) provides a wealth of information on all aspects of marriage and infidelity in particular <http://www.smartmarriages.com/infidelity.resources.html>