

Can a Couple Survive Infidelity?

By Dr. Tanja Haley

Up to date statistics are difficult to find but according to an early study, as many as 37% of married men and 20% of married women have been unfaithful, and 1 in every 2.7 couples is touched by infidelity (The National Opinion Research Centre, 1992). Furthermore, over 50% of couples who initiate counselling do so because one partner has been unfaithful. These numbers are staggering, and include sexual as well as emotional affairs.

Emotional affairs are considered a new crisis of infidelity, and are likely becoming more prevalent due to the technological age in which we live. In these kinds of affairs people who never intended to be unfaithful are unwittingly crossing the line from platonic friendships into romantic relationships, particularly in the workplace and on the Internet. Emotional affairs differ from platonic friendships in that there is 1) greater *emotional intimacy* than in the marital relationship, 2) *secrecy and deception* from the partner, 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 (Glass, 2005).

After the devastating disclosure of infidelity, intense emotions and recurrent crises are the norm. Can a relationship survive this kind of a crisis? The answer is yes; the majority of relationships not only survive infidelity, but marriage and family therapists have observed that many relationships can become stronger and more intimate after couples therapy (AAMFT Consumer Update, 2005). In general there are three stages that a couple needs to go through in order to survive the affair and rebuild the relationship (Spring, 1996):

1) *Establishing safety and addressing the traumatic symptoms*. A necessary component of establishing safety is ending all contact with the affair partner. When the affair partner is a co-worker, the contact must be strictly business, and necessary or unplanned encounters must be shared with the partner in order to rebuild trust.

2) *Telling the story of the affair*. This stage usually progresses from a truth-seeking inquisition to a more neutral process of information gathering. The guiding principle in this stage is using information to enhance healing, versus engaging in destructive interrogation.

3) *Understanding the affair and moving into the future*. The most important components of this stage are recognizing the vulnerabilities in the relationship and how they led to the affair and addressing them appropriately. The couple develops a renewed sense of trust, commitment, and a shared responsibility for change.

Over 90% of affairs occur because of the close emotional connection that is forged rather than a need for sexual intimacy (Gottman, 1999). Understanding how and why the emotional disconnection happened in the marriage is key; surviving an affair means being honest, being open, and being willing to take the steps necessary to rebuild the friendship and trust. It also requires that the unfaithful partner has the ability to empathize with his/her spouse, and will assist him/her in recovering from the betrayal. If both partners commit to working together to deal with these issues, their relationship can most definitely survive, and thrive, after infidelity.

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