

Infidelity in Couple Relationships

A striking paradox exists between husband/wife reports and behavior; while 90% disapprove of affairs surveys report that 15% of women and 25% of men acknowledge extramarital sexual involvements.

After the disclosure of an affair, intense emotions and recurrent crises are the norm. The good news, however, is that the majority of marriages not only survive infidelity but also become stronger and intimate if the crisis is dealt with in a therapeutic manner. An affair is the reason for approximately 50% of the couples who initiate treatment.

The Kinds of Affairs and their Causes

The causes of infidelity are complex and numerous. Affairs can occur in happy marriages as well as in troubled marriages. Although the involved spouse may not be getting enough from the marriage, sometimes the involved spouse is not giving enough. The causes for an extramarital relationship include low self-esteem, relationship problems (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 motivated by the passion of a new relationship. Sex addicts are compulsively attracted to the high and the anxiety release of sexual orgasm. The satisfaction for the sex addict comes at a price----feelings of shame and worthlessness. The feelings of shame and worthlessness often serve to confirm for the addict a depreciating perception of one's self. Philanders, in contrast, view extramarital sex as an entitlement of gender or status and take advantage of others without guilt. The sexual exploits of philanders serve to supply their own self-aggrandizement.

Emotional attachment ranges from casual sex and "one-night stands" to long term love affairs. Casual sexual involvement occurs more in men. In contrast, emotional involvement without sex is more typical among women. Extramarital emotional involvement differs from platonic friendship in that there is:

- Greater emotional intimacy than in the marital relationship
- Secrecy and deception from the spouse
- Sexual attraction

By the nature of a lack of physical contact, internet affairs are characterized as extramarital emotional involvements. The infidelity that combines both emotional and sexual components is the most disruptive to marital relationships.

Vulnerabilities to infidelity can be linked marital problems (e.g. avoidance of conflict, fear of intimacy) or to life cycle changes (e.g. transition to parenthood, empty nest). Sometimes an affair is a way for an unhappy spouse to leave a relationship. More often, the affair is an attempt on the part of an unhappy spouse to redress perceived injustices. **It is unreasonable to compare a forbidden love affair that is maintained by romantic idealization with the routine familiarity of every-day long-term marriage.**

The Impact of Discovery

Both spouses may suffer emotionally after the disclosure of the affair. The betrayed spouse may resemble the victims of post-traumatic stress following a catastrophic event. This can include obsessively pondering details of the affair; continuously watching for further signs of betrayal; and heightened physiological arousal (e.g. elevated blood pressure, muscle tension), flashbacks and intrusive images. The involved spouse may fear punishment forever while grieving the lost dreams associated with the affair.

Treatment and Recovery

The initial phase of treatment seeks to establish safety and addresses the painful emotions and symptoms of trauma. **Recovery cannot begin until contact with the affair partner is terminated.** As treatment proceeds, understanding the conditions contributing to the affair and telling the history of how it happened becomes important. The disclosure process evolves from a truth seeking inquisition to an informative and less emotionally reactive process. Finally, the integration of the meanings derived from the crisis into the marriage is enhanced to develop trust, commitment, empathy and shared responsibility for the relationship.

Resources for this newsletter:

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Your comments are welcomed!