

Secrets, Cybersex, Infidelity, Addiction, Trauma...and Forgiveness?

by Janis Abrahms Spring, Ph.D., A.B.P.P.

After an affair is discovered or revealed, an emotional avalanche is triggered that is often difficult for both patients and therapists to control. In my workshop with the Relationship Training Institute on November 10th, 2017, I will help therapists help their patients reframe an affair as a psychological trauma, learn how hurt and unfaithful partners respond differently to an affair, appreciate how this difference can promote healing, and learn how partners can make a healthy, self-interested decision regarding reconciliation. I will also present concrete strategies for rebuilding trust and sexual intimacy after an affair.

Infidelity is defined as a violation of sexual exclusivity when a spouse has sexual intercourse with someone other than his or her partner without that partner's consent. But this definition is strictly limited to married (heterosexual) couples and sexual intercourse. Besides including other types of committed relationships, we need to broaden the definition of infidelity to factor in Internet sex. People are spending hours talking intimately with others they will never meet, let alone touch. However, when committed partners learn of this betrayal, they often feel severely violated and decimated. As a general rule, if your partner were in the room looking over your shoulder feeling very uncomfortable with what you were doing, that may constitute an affair. At their core, affairs are about secrets and the violation of trust.

Today, there is a new world of affairs in the domain of cybersex. One of the great attractions of Internet affairs is that you can be anyone you dream of being. You can pretend you are a priest when you are a criminal, a man when you are a woman, and so forth. Often the attraction of an affair is not to the lover per se; that person may be someone the unfaithful partner idealizes or barely knows. Rather, the attraction is to the experience of the self – and that experience of romantic love, of transcending one's personal limitations, can be quite transcendent and emotionally convincing. To reiterate a point I have made in my previous writings, not only can the hurt partner not compete with the fantasy of the affair person (i.e., the unfaithful partner's lover), but the affair person cannot compete with the fantasy of the affair person. Fantasies usually promise more than we get in real life. Before unfaithful partners give up on their spouses for someone they barely know, they should ask themselves to name five things they know they will be fighting over with the affair person.

In my first book, “After the Affair: Healing the Pain and Rebuilding Trust When a Partner has been Unfaithful,” I propose a three-stage model for healing.

The first stage is making sense of the trauma of infidelity, i.e., giving a language to its effects and helping partners normalize what they are experiencing. The second stage is making a thoughtful, not an emotional, decision about whether to stay together. The third stage is for those couples who choose to stay together and learn lessons from the affair which will strengthen their bond. Here, I suggest practical strategies for how to rebuild trust, rekindle sexual intimacy, and grant or earn forgiveness in ways that make it human and attainable.

Making sense of the trauma of infidelity

Let us begin with the emotional response of the hurt party. When hurt partners discover their partner’s affair, they experience a post-traumatic stress-like reaction in which two simultaneous and competing responses occur: hyper-arousal and deadening. On the one hand, they may find it difficult to concentrate or sleep, their minds often bombarded with images of the lover. At the same time, they may lose interest in everything that used to give them meaning or purpose.

Hurt partners often describe nine types of ***psychological losses***, described below:

1. **Loss of identity:** You cannot recapture the way you are used to knowing yourself. For example, if you once thought of yourself as zesty, attractive, and capable, you lose all sense of your familiar self after discovering your partner’s affair.
2. **Loss of specialness:** You thought that you could make your partner happy the way no one else could, and you now realize that you are disposable and interchangeable.
3. **Loss of self-respect:** Hurt partners often go to extreme measures to win their partner back and feel humiliated by their desperate behavior.
4. **Loss of self-respect for not acknowledging that you were wronged:** Often the cues of deception are obvious, but hurt partners don’t confront them because the truth is too shattering. They are left struggling to forgive themselves for not speaking up about violations in the relationship.
5. **Loss of control over thoughts and actions:** Often, hurt partners become obsessed with details and spend hours compulsively checking for information.
6. **Loss of a sense of order and justice in the universe:** There is a sense that the world no longer operates according to specified rules, instead, is arbitrary and cruel.
7. **Loss of religious faith and belief in a higher power:** “If God were good,” hurt partners ask, “why would He do this to me? If I were good, why would this happen?”; the hurt partner’s sense of alienation and loss of self-confidence are profound.

8. **Loss of connection with others:** Whom do hurt parties turn to? They often want to tell their family and friends but recognize the awkwardness or destructiveness which may follow.
9. **Loss of a sense of purpose and the will to live:** This is an extreme reaction to the affair and can be fatal.

These losses capture the deep and pervasive sense of betrayal, which hurt partners experience when the affair is revealed. The most important strategy for therapists is to get patients to talk about and appreciate their losses. They will be embarrassed to admit how “badly” they believe they are coping. By giving their experience a name and context, however, therapists have a chance to help them feel less crazy, helpless, and alone. This normalization may be the most significant healing gesture therapists can offer their hurt clients.

What about unfaithful partners? Their response to the affair often is quite different, which is one reason why this work is so challenging. As eviscerating as the affair is to hurt partners, it is often validating and expansive for unfaithful partners.

Let us look at some of the more common emotional responses of unfaithful partners. Often their first response is relief. They may be relieved that their secret is out in the open. Next, they are often impatient; they want to move on. But to move on, they must learn to pay attention to their partner’s pain. In my book, “How Can I Forgive You? The Courage to Forgive, The Freedom Not To,” I talk about how therapists need to help unfaithful partners create “a transfer of vigilance.” That means, unfaithful partners must approach their partner’s trauma, express remorse, and talk about the lessons they have learned about why the affair happened. They need to address those issues that made them vulnerable to an affair, work to earn trust, and make their partner feel loved and cherished.

At the same time, hurt partners may need to learn to let go of their preoccupation with the injury, and to not bring it up every time they think of it. They also need to take a fair share of responsibility for how they may have created space between them and their partner to allow a third person to come in between them.

Other responses of the unfaithful partner include grief over the loss of the lover, justified anger and the absence of guilt, fear of losing the love of their children, paralysis (the inability to decide whether to end their relationship with the affair-person or marriage partner), and self-disgust.

Both partners need to learn how to manage their fears. The greatest fear of the unfaithful partner often is that they will never be forgiven no matter how hard they work to rebuild trust. The greatest fear of the hurt partner often is that they will never feel safe or that

they will continue to turn up evidence that renders them insecure. This belief makes it hard for unfaithful partners to recommit.

Making a thoughtful, rather than emotional decision about reconciliation

The second stage of recovery from an affair requires both partners to make a thoughtful, not an emotional, decision about whether to reconcile. This is a two-step process: making sense of feelings of love, and directly confronting one's ambivalence about returning home. When it comes to feelings of love, both partners may struggle with an intense but unwarranted attachment, i.e., the hurt partner's love for their partner, and the unfaithful partner's love for the person they had an affair with. Hurt partners may love a partner who is incapable of meeting their essential needs. Unfaithful partners may feel romantic love for the lover and be willing to risk everything for someone they hardly know. They may need help understanding the emotional, cognitive, and chemical underpinnings of romantic love so they don't act precipitously and toss away a potentially salvageable relationship with their committed partners.

In deciding whether to recommit to the marriage, partners should be encouraged to express their doubts and fears. Therapists can then help partners respond in a thoughtful way. Typically, partners may wonder, "Yes, you're making changes, but are they permanent or sincere?"; "Do you want me or just the package?"; "Should I stay for the sake of the children?"; "If I spend more time with the lover, might I be able to make a better decision about what is best for me?" and, "after so much damage has taken place, how can I trust you again?" These questions underscore each partner's ambivalence about recommitting and must be answered thoughtfully.

Rebuilding the relationship

After an affair, there are three essential conditions to rebuilding trust and earning forgiveness. Unfaithful partners must 1) pay attention to the pain they caused and offer a meaningful, generous, specific, heart-felt apology, 2) they must look deeply into themselves and figure out why they strayed so they can protect the boundaries of the relationship, and 3) they must work hard to earn trust and generate feelings of love. Both partners need to take a fair share of responsibility for how they contributed to creating a space between them that made room for someone else, and to work hard to make their partner feel loved and cherished.

Those who attend this course will hear my unromantic model of love and reconciliation. It begins when the unfaithful partner has a funeral for the lover and, turns toward the hurt partner. Then both partners begin to treat each other in ways that foster tenderness, trust, and intimacy. And then, last (not first, as many partners wish), feelings of love may return.