

Affair Repair Short Manual for Couples

By Dr Estelle Bailey

The term "infidelity" pertains to a breach of trust, a fundamental element in the commitment of a couple within conventional relationships. This trust hinges on the unspoken commitment to emotional and/or sexual exclusivity. The revelation of infidelity in your relationship can be exceptionally challenging for both you and your partner, often leading to intense emotional distress. This brief informational piece by a psychologist aims to provide you and your partner with background knowledge and suggestions, whether you choose to reconcile or part ways. You are not alone; assistance and support are readily available.

The Moment of Discovery

The moment when infidelity comes to light can be overwhelmingly distressing for you and your partner. It marks a highly stressful period, often thrusting your lives into utter chaos (Nelson, 2013). The partner who uncovers the infidelity may be flooded with thoughts such as, "How long has this been happening?," "Is my relationship over?," "How many people know?," "How could I have placed trust in him/her?," and "How could she/he betray me like this?" These thoughts are accompanied by a rush of emotions, including anger, shame, hurt, jealousy, betrayal, fear, and uncertainty. Many people describe feeling like all hope is lost, and their relationship is irreparably damaged.

Similar to the one who discovers the infidelity, the partner whose unfaithfulness is exposed may also grapple with painful thoughts and emotions. If you were unfaithful, you may have various reasons for connecting with someone outside your primary relationship. Infidelity often doesn't solely result from an unhappy relationship; sometimes, it arises due to opportunity. Research indicates that infidelity can be a way to be someone else rather than being with someone else (Perel, 2017).

This crisis that both of you are facing can be the initial step in recovering from infidelity. During this crisis phase, your primary goals are to establish a sense of security, address your painful emotions, and work through any trauma (Nelson, 2013). It's crucial to refrain from making hasty decisions about staying together or separating during this emotionally charged period. The opportunity to make such decisions will be more effective later in the process.

Denial

Despite the initial shock and overwhelming nature of infidelity, reflection often reveals a series of actions, hints, and behaviors that preceded both the discovery and the act of infidelity itself. Each partner may have concealed thoughts and feelings from themselves over an extended period, a phenomenon known as denial. Denial is an unconscious defense mechanism that helps resolve emotional conflict and alleviate anxiety by unconsciously disavowing unbearable thoughts.

In hindsight, you may recollect signs that something was amiss, such as changes in work habits, unexpected expenses, or warnings from friends. These realizations can intensify the feeling of being blindsided and deepen the sense of betrayal, both by your partner and your own instincts. Now that you're both confronted with the affair, the uninvolved partner may want to know every detail.

Trust and Truth

Trust and truth are closely related, but it's important to recognize that there are various kinds of truth (Perel, 2017). Consider which truths are beneficial for you as individuals and as a couple. Some forms of knowledge offer clarity, while others, such as details about the affair, serve only to torment. Differentiate between investigative questions that focus on the meaning and motives of the affair and detective questions that delve into the sordid details.

Concerns About Children

Children, regardless of their age, are highly attuned to the dynamics in the household, as they require a sense of security and a safe haven within the family. While parents may assume that their children are unaware, children often pick up on emotional cues more than parents realize. To rebuild their sense of security and trust, acknowledge your children's fears or sadness and reassure them of your love. Also, make an effort to engage with your children emotionally, as the focus on the infidelity and your own pain may have diverted your attention. Regular check-ins, physical affection, and quality time are essential in this regard.

The Role of Monogamy in Modern Society

Marriage, established thousands of years ago, served vital purposes like determining paternity, maintaining family assets, and ensuring financial stability. In the present day, women have gained financial independence and active careers, and social media has expanded our social networks, offering both opportunities for connection and potential threats (Brimhall, Miller, Maxwell, & Alotaiby, 2017).

Over the centuries, monogamy has become synonymous with morality, leading to judgments and stigmatization of those accused of infidelity. Many religions harshly condemn infidelity, despite its longstanding presence. Infidelity can harm a relationship, but it doesn't necessarily make the unfaithful partner a bad person. They remain the person you fell in love with and married, and your relationship is a creation of both partners (Hendrix, 2012).

Couples Therapy

Some couples choose to navigate the aftermath of infidelity on their own, while others seek assistance from a qualified therapist. If you opt for therapy, find a therapist both you and your partner feel comfortable with, and who is experienced in addressing the challenges you're facing. Options include Imago Relationship Therapy, Emotion Focused Couples Therapy, and many others. In therapy, you'll likely discover that you and your partner collectively shape the quality of your relationship, and that the outcomes, whether positive or negative, are not solely one person's responsibility. While couples' therapy may confront you with challenging realities, it's an effective means of taking responsibility for your own role in the relationship and recognizing that change starts with oneself.

Observing What Happened

This transition brings us to the second phase of recovery post-infidelity, known as the insight phase (Nelson, 2013). During this phase, the focus shifts to recognizing, observing, and discussing the vulnerabilities that led to the affair. This encompasses examining the history that brought you to this point, including past emotional wounds, communication styles, problem-solving methods, sexual dynamics, and the parts of yourself that you felt unable to express within the relationship. Instead of dwelling on minute details of the affair, it's more constructive to seek a deeper understanding of what was missing for the partner who

sought external connections, affection, or intimacy and to empathize with the partner who was unaware of these needs.

A New Relationship

Did you know that the majority of couples affected by infidelity do not end up divorcing (Atkins, Marin, Lo, Kahn, & Hahlweg, 2010)? This realization brings us to the third phase of post-infidelity recovery, known as the vision phase (Nelson, 2013). Now that you've explored the factors that led to this point, you can decide whether it is meaningful to stay together or proceed with separation. In this phase, you can also reestablish intimacy, desire, and design the future you envision together.

This implies that both you and your partner will need to create a new relationship agreement and break old patterns. To achieve different outcomes, new patterns and interactions are required moving forward. Your previous marriage may have ended, but you're embarking on something fundamentally different. It can be beneficial to establish a written agreement detailing your future expectations, needs, and dreams for your relationship. Similar to any other agreement, this relationship contract can be discussed and modified over time, recognizing that life is dynamic, and relationships require adjustments as circumstances change (McCarthy & Wald, 2013).

During this phase, you and your partner can discuss the meaning of monogamy, what constitutes infidelity, and what is acceptable within your relationship. Approximately 10-15% of couples may opt for a non-traditional relationship agreement, such as an open relationship or polyamory (McCarthy & Wald, 2013). The goal is to create a relationship that aligns with your values and desires, rather than conforming to externally imposed norms.

References

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