



Affairs & Infidelity

After the devastating disclosure of infidelity, intense emotions and recurrent crises are the norm. The good news, however, is that the majority of marriages not only survive infidelity, but marriage and family therapists have observed that many marriages can become stronger and more intimate after couples therapy. An extramarital involvement (EMI) is the catalyst for approximately 50 percent of the couples who initiate treatment. A striking paradox is that while polls indicate 90 percent disapproved of extramarital relationships, a national survey reported that 15 percent of wives and 25 percent of husbands had experienced extramarital intercourse. When emotional affairs or sexual intimacies without intercourse are included, the incidence increases by 20 percent.

Causes and Types of Extramarital Relationships

The causes of infidelity are complex and varied. Affairs can occur in happy marriages as well as in troubled ones. Although the involved spouse may not be getting enough from the marriage, sometimes the involved spouse is not giving enough. Reasons for EMI include low self-esteem, relationship deficits (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 driven by the passion of a new relationship. Sexual addicts are compulsively attracted to the high and the anxiety release of sexual orgasm. But such release comes with a price -- feelings of shame and worthlessness.

In contrast, philanderers who perceive extramarital sex as an entitlement of gender or status take advantage of opportunities without guilt or withdrawal symptoms.

A new crisis of infidelity is emerging in which 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 spouse, 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.

“I never dreamed this would happen to us. We got along so well.”



Vulnerabilities for EMI can be linked to marital problems (e.g., avoidance of conflict, fear of intimacy) or life cycle changes (e.g., transition to parenthood, empty-nest). Some dissatisfied spouses begin an extramarital relationship as a way of exiting from an unhappy marriage. More frequently, however, the marital history is re-written to justify an ongoing affair. It is unreasonable to compare a forbidden love affair that is maintained by romantic idealization with the routine familiarity of a long-term marriage.

The Impact of Discovery

It is common for both spouses to experience depression (including suicidal thoughts), anxiety, and/or a profound sense of loss following the initial disclosure. The reactions of the betrayed spouse resemble the post-traumatic stress symptoms of the victims of catastrophic events. Common reactions to the loss of innocence and shattered assumptions include obsessively pondering details of the affair; continuously watching for further signs of betrayal; and physiological hyperarousal, flashbacks and intrusive images. The most severely traumatized are those who had the greatest trust and were the most unsuspecting. The involved spouse may fear that they will be punished forever for the betrayal while they grieve for the lost dreams associated with the affair.

Treatment & Recovery

The first issue to be addressed in therapy is clarifying whether the purpose of treatment is rebuilding the marriage, resolving ambivalence about whether to remain married, or separating in a constructive way. One spouse may want to reconcile while the other spouse is still ambivalent or has decided to leave. Most family therapists work with the couple together as the primary approach. However, an ambivalent spouse or a severely agitated spouse may also need some individual therapy sessions.

One way to help couples rebuild marriages after the disclosure of infidelity is based on an interpersonal trauma model -- a process of recovery and healing leading to forgiveness. The first stage of recovery after the impact of the disclosure establishes safety and addresses the painful emotions and traumatic symptoms. Understanding the vulnerabilities for the EMI and telling the story of the affair comprise the middle stage. Integrating the meaning of the affair into the present, and moving on into the future, is the final stage of healing and forgiveness.

Establishing Safety

Recovery cannot begin until contact with the affair partner is terminated. Stopping an affair does not just mean ending sexual intercourse. All personal discussions, coffee breaks and phone calls must also be stopped. When the

A wall of secrecy in the marriage and a window of intimacy in the affair usually characterize extramarital triangles.





affair partner is a co-worker, the contact must be strictly business. Any necessary or unplanned encounters must be shared with the spouse in order to rebuild trust.



Telling the Story of the Affair

A guiding principle is that information will enhance healing. However, a destructive process of interrogation and defensiveness never promotes healing, even if the answers are truthful.

Simple facts such as who, what, where and when can be answered during the early stage to relieve some of the pressure for information. It is preferable to delay complex questions about motivations and explicit details about sexual intimacy until the process itself is more healing.

The disclosure process evolves in therapy from a truth-seeking inquisition to the neutral process of information seeking – similar to a journalist and an interviewee. The final phase is one of mutual exploration with an empathic process. 🌀

The text for this brochure was written by Shirley P. Glass, Ph.D., and is provided courtesy of the American Association for Marriage & Family Therapy.

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Contact us to learn more about our practice and schedule a free half-hour phone consultation with one of our clinicians. We offer appointments 7 days a week and have reduced fee options. Our offices are conveniently located in McLean, Virginia & Glenn Dale, Maryland.

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