

The Trauma of Infidelity

With the exception of the death of a child, there is no marital or relationship event more painful than the discovery of a partner's infidelity. The disorienting aftereffects of such a betrayal resemble the psychic disorientation and confusion that we see in victims of earthquakes or other such natural disasters. And like the victims of these disasters, the individuals I treat following the discovery of a marital or relationship betrayal will frequently experience symptoms of post traumatic stress.

Like trauma victims, it is not unusual for betrayed spouses to replay in their minds the previously assumed "benign events" which occurred during the weeks, months, or years that the affair was continuing. The deceived partner begins to realize that the use of cell phones had made it possible for some of those benign events to have been not quite so benign. Was he in fact really on the golf course when he phoned that day to say the foursome in front of him was slowing things down and that he would be home later than expected? And that time she said her plane was delayed in the Denver airport and would have to stay over an extra night, was she really alone? Was she even in Denver?

Everyday I see individuals so badly traumatized by the discovery of an ongoing affair that they are barely able to get through a day. Sometimes the most helpful thing I can do is to simply "normalize" their pain and suffering by reminding them that their reaction to a betrayal of this magnitude is not at all unusual and, in many ways, is to be expected.

The process of healing from this trauma becomes particularly painful and prolonged when couples accept advice offered by well-meaning but misguided friends and relatives. For example, couples are often told to stop focusing on the infidelity and to get on with their lives. They are cautioned that "dredging up" the details of the affair will further injure the innocent partner. The unfaithful partners, because of their shame about the episode, will often latch-on to this advice, believing that they are simply protecting their partners from the unsavory facts of the affair.

However, in most cases, ignorance is not bliss. It is my experience that for the majority of (but not all) couples, the process of healing from the trauma of infidelity is accelerated when all of the injured partner's questions are gently yet completely answered without focusing unnecessary concern upon sparing the innocent partner's feelings.

Although no one would ever choose to have the discovery of infidelity be the reason they enter marital or relationship therapy, it is not at all unusual for the "innocent partner" to share with me his or her belief that learning about the partner's secret affair turned out to be one of the best things that ever happened to their marriage. I am no longer surprised when they tell me that uncovering that terrible secret turned out to be a "blessing in disguise."

For many of these couples the discovery of an affair is often the wake up call they needed to finally motivate them to address the unresolved relationship issues they had been ignoring for years. Couples report that only after working through the painful aftereffects of infidelity are they able, for perhaps the first time in their marriage, to enjoy the kind of intimate, loving relationship they had feared they would never achieve.

I invite you to phone me at 410-377-4343 or email me at babass@towson.edu or visit my website to schedule an appointment to discuss your concerns.

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