



The Emotional Consequences of Infidelity and its Impact on Divorce

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When the emotional impact of infidelity is unresolved, the divorce process can be turned into a costly and stressful battle — one that lasts far beyond the end of the marriage.

The topic of infidelity is a heated one, which lends itself to a wide spectrum of speculations, judgments and emotional reactions. It also leads to many questions such as: “How could this have happened?” “Should I stay or should I go?” “Can my marriage be saved?” “Will I ever be able to get past my anger?” and “Will I ever be able to survive this divorce?”

Defining Infidelity

To begin with, we must keep in mind that what constitutes “infidelity” to one person or couple, may not constitute “infidelity” to another. The key factor that bonds all definitions of infidelity is the feeling of betrayal as an outcome. The act occurs within a committed relationship and is a violation of the agreed-upon norms and boundaries (whether clearly stated or implied) within that relationship. It may be sexual and/or emotional. It may be precipitated by either party in the relationship. In a number of studies conducted in 2005, it was found that

infidelity occurs in approximately 25% of all relationships and tends to be initiated by more men than women. In my practice, I have found an equal proportion of male and female betrayers.

Infidelity is Often a Symptom

“How could this have happened?” is a common and natural question; and not a simple one to answer. Often, but not always, “infidelity” is a symptom of an underlying troubled relationship. The “betrayer” is unable to cope with unresolved conflicting issues in the relationship, be they emotional and/or physical. Rather than choosing to tackle the issues directly with her/his partner, he/she chooses to seek out another partner in secrecy. One example of an issue that I have seen in my practice was of a man who felt powerless in his relationship with a critical and domineering wife. Having a secret extramarital affair was the only way he could find to assert his independence. Another example was a woman who no longer felt emotionally

or physically passionate about her marriage, but feared hurting her partner by telling him. Instead, she found passion in a secret relationship with another man.

A second possible source of “infidelity” is unresolved emotional issues within an individual that are not directly related to his/her marriage. These can include a history of childhood sexual abuse, childhood emotional deprivation, sexual identity issues, or an internal struggle with feelings of self-worth.

Whatever the origin of the act of infidelity, the resulting emotional reactions in the “betrayed” cover a wide spectrum, but tend to be consistent across individuals. Shock, devastation, anger, sadness, shame, anxiety, self-doubt, confusion and a desire for revenge are but a few. Some common emotions in the “betrayer” include fear, sadness, guilt, remorse, shame, anxiety, confusion and feelings of worthlessness.

Infidelity: Relationship at a Crossroad

Once the act of infidelity is exposed, the impact on the relationship is typically devastating to both parties. The essential question that follows is: “Should we recommit or quit?” Relationships can be saved through couple therapy as long as both parties are equally committed to the process. Having one party stay at home while the other pursues therapy will not ultimately save the relationship. Both parties must be willing to invest a high degree of effort over an extended period of time, and “time” itself must pass for true trust to be restored. On the other hand, it is not unusual for one party to choose to reconcile, while the other chooses to end the relationship. This will pose an extreme emotional challenge to the partner who wishes to work towards reconciliation. Many of the reactions that I have described above (e.g. shock, devastation, anger, sadness, shame, anxiety, self-doubt, confusion and a desire for revenge) will be intensified and further complicated by grief and mourning.

The Potential Emotional Damage

When a decision to divorce is made, both partners will be experiencing a “death,” and their emotional response will be similar to the response to an actual death of a loved one. Each individual will enter a stage of grief and mourning, which will be experienced to varying intensities. If one person does not want to let go while the other is ready to quit, the former person may suffer a more intense grief reaction, which is typically characterized by feelings of anger and depression. An unhealthy divorce will most likely follow if healthy grief work and the resolution of feelings of betrayal are not achieved. Here are some typical case scenarios:

A male client was enraged with his wife for pursuing an extramarital affair and then asking him for a divorce. He found that he could not let go of his rage, and chose to use his 10 and 12 year-old children as a weapon against his wife. He attempted to alienate his children from her by continuously bad-mouthing her to them (including telling

them that she cheated on him), and evoking guilt in them when they chose to spend time with her rather than him. Furthermore, this client attempted to gain full custody of his children and to prove that his wife was an incompetent parent. In reality, his wife was an extremely competent and compassionate mother with whom the children had a very strong and healthy bond.

This serves as a critical example of how unresolved feelings of anger resulting from infidelity cannot only impede a healthy divorce process, but can also cause serious emotional damage to the children. It is crucial that children are given the freedom to bond equally with both of their parents, regardless of whether one parent betrayed the other. The children should NEVER be told about the betrayal, as then they will be pressured to take sides. Furthermore, each child feels that he/she is an extension of each parent. When one parent bad-mouths the other, the child’s self-esteem is deeply injured.

Another case example would be a female client who caught her husband in bed with another woman. This client was suffering from feelings of inadequacy prior to the discovery. Her low self-esteem predated her marriage. As she found her husband distancing from her in the last few months, her self-esteem plummeted. She decided to file for a divorce based on infidelity but, at the same time, concluded that it would be best for her husband and three children if she slid out of the picture as quickly as possible. She therefore directed her lawyer to give her husband 75% of the assets, as well as full custody of the children. Clearly her actions are not only short-changing herself, but also the emotional needs of her children to have both parents present and active in their lives.

A third example would be a male client who always felt a deep sense of emotional deprivation in his marriage. In his eyes, his wife attended to everyone else’s needs before his own. This left him feeling chronically and deeply hurt and enraged. To add insult to injury, this man discovered that his wife was having an affair with another man, after

which she asked for a divorce. In retaliation, the client was determined to “rob his wife clean” of any equal division of assets. In his mind, she “owed” him for all the years that she deprived him emotionally and for her recent affair. A vicious legal battle followed.

A fourth example would be a male client who engaged in an extramarital affair for one year while continuously feeling torn. On the one hand, he could not exit the relationship, but on the other hand he experienced extreme guilt and shame. Finally, finding these emotions unbearable, he broke up his relationship with the other woman and approached his wife with a full admission of guilt. Witnessing her distraught state and experiencing her intense rage, his feelings of shame and guilt became unbearable. As a means of alleviating the intensity of his emotions, he entered the divorce process with the intent of giving his wife “anything” she wanted. This allowed her to demand “everything” as a means of discharging her anger.

All of the above examples address clients who struggled with deep unresolved emotions resulting from the cause and effects of infidelity. As a consequence, each client entered into an unhealthy divorce process. In the first and third examples, both clients were motivated by rage and a desire to gain revenge against their partners. In the second and fourth examples, the clients were motivated by feelings of extreme inadequacy, shame and guilt. Such unhealthy sources of motivation typically create the basis for high conflict and highly problematic divorce processes. All family members suffer, including innocent children.

A Healthy Divorce is Possible

Psychotherapy can assist individuals in gaining awareness of their unresolved emotional issues, working these issues through, and developing new skills to cope with the reality of a dissolved marriage. Upon completion of such work, these individuals will be well-equipped to enter a healthy divorce process. It becomes a win-win situation for all

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family members. In my clinical practice, I have had the privilege of facilitating this process for many clients.

At this point I must add a cautionary statement. It is tempting for many individuals who are going through the divorce process, especially one that evolves around infidelity, to reach out only to non-professionals for emotional assistance. Friends, family members and lawyers can act as good sounding boards and reliable sources of support. A trained psychotherapist, however, possesses the professional and objective skills needed to help individuals tackle their emotional obstacles in a deeper and more fundamental way.

The disclosure of infidelity in a marriage is a traumatic event for most individuals. Both the “betrayed” and the “betrayed” are frequently challenged on deep emotional levels. If reconciliation is chosen by both partners, these emotions can be addressed and resolved in couple therapy, and the marriage can be saved. On the other hand, if the choice is to dissolve the marriage and these emotions are left unresolved, they can easily motivate individuals to pursue unhealthy and high-conflict divorces. All family members will be injured. Seeking professional help through psychotherapy can prevent these painful consequences. ■

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