

When Infidelity Is Revealed

When infidelity is revealed, whether through disclosure or discovery, the couple is in *crisis*. A *trauma* has occurred in the relationship. Along with referring the couple to a professional marriage counselor, following are some key concepts to keep in mind to assess their situation and to care for them.

Assessing the situation

Listen to their story

Details such as the nature of the infidelity, the extent of the affair and who it was with need to be processed, along with assessing whether the affair has fully ended. If you notice that either partner is a danger to themselves or others, and if they cannot carry out their daily responsibilities, recommend the couple visit a professional marriage counselor right away.

Encourage honesty

This is the time to “come clean.” Many injured spouses say the lying is the most devastating part of the betrayal. To begin work on the marriage, only to have more bits and pieces of the story trickle out, can be the death nail to the relationship. If the revelation is only part of a long-term pattern of betrayal or addiction, the participating partner will need time to tell his or her story. However, it is recommended he or she do it with guidance from a counselor. The injured partner also needs support for this full disclosure session. (Ref: Bethesda’s full disclosure info)

The participating partner must take 100% of the responsibility. Period. There can be no minimizing or rationalizing. Understanding can come through individual and couple therapy, but the person who stepped out of the relationship is to blame. The injured partner must see this and believe that the participating partner is truly repentant.

Normalize the trauma including flashbacks and what to do when they happen

A “flashback” is a reexperiencing of a traumatic event, and is a common symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Flashbacks are intense and frequent following the revelation of infidelity and occur in both the injured partner and the participating partner. When that happens, calm the couple from the traumatic state and encourage them to talk to their counselor about what they should do when flashbacks occur.

Assess the health risks

Find out if there was unprotected sex and what kind of protection was used. If they have not already, encourage both partners to get tested for sexually transmitted diseases.

Set realistic expectations for treatment

Most couples need several months of professional counseling to help them heal individually and as a couple. This may seem daunting and even discouraging at the outset. However, it is well worth the time and effort to gain understanding about themselves and gain better relationship tools for the future.

Help the couple understand that recovery will take time. The injured partner must believe the participating partner really understands his or her hurts. Therefore, when the injured partner needs to talk about the pain, the participating partner needs to be able to listen and validate without being defensive, attacking or stonewalling.

In addition to the assessment and groundwork for treatment, caregivers should be prepared to answer frequently asked questions:

How could this have happened?

This is often the first question that torments one or even both partners. It is important for both partners to eventually be able to make sense of why this happened in order to feel safe to continue the marriage. However, the participating partner may not know the answer yet. Try to help the couple set this burning question aside for the moment, since it will be a major part of their ongoing recovery.

How much detail is appropriate and what is unhelpful?

Often the injured partner is compelled to know every detail of the infidelity. Honesty is important, however, anything that will cause undue hurt to the injured spouse, such as the minute details of the sexual activity may do more harm than good, since it can trigger additional flashbacks.

Who should we tell?

Generally, both partners should tell at least one person who is safe and loving, who will give emotional and practical support and will hold each partner accountable. In general, we advise the couple to tell the participating partner's parents, but hold off on telling the injured partner's family. If the desire is to save the marriage, it is advisable to limit the number of people who are informed at this time.

What about the children?

It is important that children feel safe and loved. They may have questions which should be answered in an age-appropriate way and without denigrating either parent.

Should they separate or stay under the same roof?

If it is possible, it is advisable to stay together while working through the infidelity. However, the couple should separate if they are having frequent and intense arguments, and especially if they escalate to physical violence.

What is the difference between forgiveness and reconciliation?

Forgiveness is about letting go of your right to be paid back. Care should be taken to not “rush to forgive,” but forgiveness should happen as the losses are grieved and healing takes place. Forgiveness can occur without reconciliation. Reconciliation requires genuine repentance and rebuilding of trust by the participating partner in order to restore the relationship.

What are appropriate trust re-building requests?

When trust has been breached, naturally the injured partner will need time to observe consistent changed behavior from the participating partner in order to rebuild trust. He or she may request access to passwords, frequent check-ins, and other accountability to feel safe again in the relationship. (See *After the Affair*, Trust Rebuilding Requests)

Can we ever get back to normal?

The gospel enables genuine repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation and healing, which gets worked out in each unique relationship differently. As caregivers, we have the joy to instill hope to the brokenhearted and walk alongside those who are trusting our Wonderful Counselor, no matter what the outcome.

Recommended Resources:

- *Getting Past the Affair*, by Douglas K. Snyder, PhD, Donald H. Baucom, PhD, & Kristina Coop Gordon, PhD
- *After the Affair: Healing the pain and Rebuilding Trust when a Partner Has Been Unfaithful*, by Janis A. Spring
- Bethesda Workshops, <https://www.bethesdaworkshops.org/for-professionals/disclosure/>