

Infidelity:  
After an Affair,  
Who Owns the Relationship?

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January 26, 2018

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“I appreciate couples therapy, but I can’t stop fantasizing about group therapy.”

I want to discuss how to hold a couple  
(or individual) after betrayal.

We need to guide patients through  
a painful journey  
for which they may lack the skills they need.

We can help them develop these skills,  
although that's usually not  
what they came for.

# Common clinical assumptions about sexual exclusivity

- It's the gold standard of relationships
- It's a reasonable, "normal" goal for adults
- People who dislike it, don't want it, or have trouble with it are immature
- Healthy sexual desire is driven by love
- Lack or loss of desire can be explained & fixed
- Couples should be able to work out any issues about this

Historically, our culture's ideas  
about monogamy are  
new & radical.

When we support  
the “normality” of monogamy,  
we're not helping anyone.

“Well, of course they split up...

...they were only having sex  
with each other!”

Many people start out sincerely  
desiring and expecting to  
live monogamously...

...and years later,  
find themselves stuck with a contract  
they don't like.

Most heterosexual couples  
have no honest way  
to deal with this dilemma.

Various forms & degrees of infidelity  
are a common strategy.

# AFFAIRS & CONTRACTS

An “affair” is a contract violation.

What’s the contract?

Do the partners agree on this?

Renegotiating the contract  
may be part of resolving an affair...  
eventually

If one partner feels betrayed,  
that must be dealt with.

Then people can discuss the contract,  
and what “really” happened.

Negotiating too soon will feel like  
a lack of empathy.

# EXISTENTIAL ISSUES

Existential issues are internal conflicts arising from the ongoing, inescapable confrontation with the givens of human existence.

Both the betrayed and therapist  
(and even the betrayer)  
may prefer to overlook this;

The simplistic model of  
“bad betrayer” &  
“good/victimimized betrayed”  
may be much easier to deal with.

# Why people “cheat”

- I see how I look to my lover;  
I love being the me he sees (and can fall in love w/the person who sees me this way).
- Sex may be a vehicle to something else.
- It's easier to get sexually enthusiastic w/a new partner than w/a spouse. Many of us are emotionally lazy.



“I don’t need to be with someone all the time.  
Being pursued is enough.”

the desire for intimacy  
vs.  
the desire for autonomy

the desire to be known  
vs.  
the fear of being known

the desire for sexual novelty

vs.

the desire for sexual predictability

the desire to be attractive to others

vs.

the knowledge of  
one's declining attractiveness

One way people deal with  
these conflicts is by  
infidelity or other sexual betrayal.

Some ways of dealing with these conflicts are more socially approved than infidelity:

- Depression
- Overwork
- Over-parenting
- Over-entwinement w/parents
- Obsession w/making money
- Constantly redecorating
- Health problems

An affair can be a desperate attempt to  
STAY in a relationship.

People sometimes admit this:

“When you wouldn’t have sex,  
or you treated me so badly,  
what else could I do?”

The alternative is a conversation  
that may seem  
impossible or mistaken.

But everyone is responsible for  
how they choose to deal with  
their dilemmas.

The betrayed can be sympathetic  
to the betrayer's dilemma...

And still hold the betrayer accountable  
for her choices.

# POWER DYNAMICS

After betrayal, either partner may resort to unhealthy power dynamics

- Passive-aggressiveness
- Withholding sex
- Withholding other engagement
- Sarcasm and “teasing”
- Narratives of blame
- “I don’t care anymore;” withdrawal
- “You owe me”
- “I apologized, what else do you want?”

“You betrayed me,  
now I’m in charge.”

As satisfying as this may be  
to the person in pain,  
it prevents a collaborative approach  
to resolving the affair.

Don't underestimate  
the strategic advantages of  
hanging on  
to anger or hurt  
about being betrayed.

# Advantages of holding onto hurt, anger

- Bargaining
- Deflecting criticism
- Deflecting self-criticism
- Preparing for contract negotiation
- Preparing to leave relationship
- Settle old score
- Prove something to family, friends

People are responsible for the extent to  
which they feel hurt or angry,  
**AND**  
for how they deal with it.

If the therapist  
validates narratives such as  
victimhood or  
powerlessness over emotions  
this can collude with  
patients' unhealthy power dynamics.

# HOW PEOPLE RESPOND TO INFIDELITY

# Common assumptions of the betrayed

- You don't care about me at all.
- Everything has changed.
- Nothing was as it seemed.
- You lose all your rights.
- I get to handle this any way I like.
- You owe me whatever I say you do.
- I define all aspects of this, unilaterally.
- I can tell anyone, and anything, I want.
- I don't have to do anything for us to progress.

# The betrayed can damage the relationship

- Telling people: family, kids, friends, community
- Damaging property
- “Revenge” affair
- Public shaming
- Harming partner’s job/career
- Harming oneself
- Violating partner’s privacy
- Becoming bitter
- Refusing to participate in joint events
- Feeling entitled to revenge or punishment

# Contrasting agendas for the betrayed:

- (1) I probably want to reconcile
- (2) I want to express my feelings

If you damage the relationship enough when expressing your upset, you won't have much left to reconstruct.



North  
Sea

BERLIN ★

Germany

zoom

STRASBOURG ●

France

zoom

EUROPE

# The betrayer can damage the relationship

- Lack of empathy; avoiding partner's emotions
- Rolling out information gradually
- Trying to get back to normal too quickly
- Demanding too much change, or too quickly
- Expecting sex too soon
- Comparing partner to lover
- Resisting having a reconciliation plan
- Resisting self-awareness

# Do one or both want to reconcile?

- Under what conditions?
- Do they have a joint vision of the desired relationship?
- Do they want the sex to be different?
- If they want change, how will they create it?
- How will they measure the change?
- How will they know they've "made it"?
- **Why should they stay together?**

TRUST

How do I know you won't do it  
again?

How have you changed?  
What will you do differently?  
How will we change?



**“Kathleen, I have a confession. I’ve been cold and indifferent with another woman.”**

No one can prove they're  
being faithful.

That's why "trust" is so important—  
belief in the absence of data.

Monitoring one's betrayer may give  
the illusion of security,  
and be a form of punishment...

But it doesn't add to trust.

It prevents the development of trust.

Resist and interpret  
the betrayed's demand  
that betrayer divulge everything.

Resist and interpret  
the betrayer's impulse  
to gratify the demand  
to divulge everything.

# GOING THROUGH THE PROCESS

# Taking couples through a process

- Not the one they thought they'd do w/us.
- What is it about—punishment? Prevention? Other?
- Deciding to reconcile vs designing a new relationship.
- Emphasize everyone's agency, vs being trapped by emotions, convention, or assumed meanings.
- Be compassionate about their internal confrontations.
- A developmental transition for each & for the couple; “a crisis is a terrible thing to waste.”

Most people in pain want  
simple answers.

Some people want to  
keep their anger and move forward,  
which is complicated.

# Recovering from betrayal

- You have to want to. It may take time even to want to.
- You don't have to know how you're going to recover in order to want to recover.
- Delicate balance of assigning blame, vs healing the problem together.
- Taking your own pain seriously, vs the need to create cooperative environment.

# Recovery from infidelity requires adult skills

- How to compromise without feeling like a fool
- How to tolerate another's feelings
- How to self-soothe
- How to communicate when embarrassed, ashamed, angry, lonely, or anxious
- How to accept the consequences of one's decisions
- Accepting that no one gets everything they want
- Accepting that life is complicated, and rarely black-and-white

Most people  
would rather recover from infidelity  
without developing these skills.

Healing from betrayal:

Partly an individual project,  
partly a couples project.

Is porn a form of infidelity?

Let's discuss that next month.

*“I understand you're in pain about that”  
is always appropriate.*

# TREATMENT NOTES



George Dole

"Well, what wild suggestions did your therapist come up with *this* time?"

# “Affairs”

- Is this an actual deal-breaker? If not, now what?
- Does couple intend to pursue a life together now?
- What other relationship contracts have been broken?
- Who has been told? Couple needs damage control, including boundaries on discussing this w/others.
- Challenge diagnosis of “sex addict”
- Other books, groups, websites, therapists involved?
- Is there one relationship they both want to have?

# The betrayed

Does the betrayed...

- have any responsibilities?
- understand the betrayer's pain?
- acquire rights? For how long?
- now own the relationship?
- get to mind-read or psychologize the betrayer?
- now repudiate the entire relationship history?
  
- Does betrayal justify whatever betrayed then did?
- What exactly does betrayed want now?

# The betrayer

- Does betrayer understand the betrayed's pain?
- What is betrayer's understanding of what s/he did?
- Exactly how did s/he decide to cheat?
- How does s/he feel about her/his betrayal?
- What does betrayer want?
- Does betrayer intend to change?
  - What?
  - How?
  - Why?
  - When?

# Treating “affairs”

- See the system; don't take sides
- Betrayer doesn't lose all rights
- Betrayed's rights aren't limitless
- What does betrayed want w/info s/he's requesting?
- Needed: joint definition of the transgression
- Asking betrayed to tolerate our fairness is a way of maintaining their relationship
- What's the goal of counseling now?
- Put boundaries around betrayed's anger
- They need a story for the public
- They're still a partnership, right?

# Treatment

- The meanings people choose determine what pain they feel
- Acknowledgement vs admitting guilt or meaning
- Now vs future (current feelings vs what will we do next)
- How you deal w/feelings will shape our options—  
so use self-discipline
- What does either partner want now?
- Why should I trust you again? Answer: betrayer does real internal work. And makes it visible to spouse--often.
- You can't prevent someone from cheating. Don't try.
- What relationship contract do they want? Why?

# Each person must discover why they're responding to infidelity the way they are

- My dad's cheating ruined our family
- If I'm cuckolded I'm not a real man
- I'll never be safe
- "I've always said one affair & you're out"
- I have to protect my kids
- I'm not attractive enough
- I'm getting old
  
- It might have been my last chance w/a young woman
- I felt young, attractive, desired
- I wanted real sex
- It was too perfect to turn down

# Sex

- If you go back to the sex life you were having, will you both be satisfied?
- Most long-term couples stop talking about sex (unless they're in conflict). They don't share their aspirations, fantasies, masturbation, desire for change, horny moments during the day.
- In a desire discrepancy, many couples give up.
- If there are "dysfunctions," discuss or treat them.
- Unlikely they'll agree on the couple's history.

We do NOT want anyone acquiescing  
to a contract of fidelity.

That's part of what got them  
into their current problem—  
they didn't own the contract.



“We’ll be single again in Heaven, right?”

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