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AFTER THE AFFAIR ¹

Among the worst experiences a lover or spouse can endure is discovering that their partner either is having or has had an affair. The sense of betrayal is so powerful that one does not think it is possible to ever get over it...ever. Someone who feels betrayed may experience a wide array of emotions ranging from deep sadness to severe depression to murderous rage, and everything in between. There is no *correct* set of feelings appropriate to this universal experience. The effects of an affair on a relationship can similarly range from total destruction to a desire to learn from the affair and work toward strengthening the relationship. In the words of Dr. Janis Abrahms Spring, an affair can either be “a death knell or a wake-up call.”

Frequently, patients may say to me that they are considering having an affair. They may either have someone in mind, or they may be simply musing about the possibility. Invariably, however, there is some underlying issue that is driving these thoughts. Why else would they be willing to violate their commitment vows for a one-night stand? A one-night stand leaves the relationship altered in some way even if one is not caught. It leaves the unfaithful partner living a lie that will affect the relationship. I suggest that instead of acting on the fantasy, they discuss their discontent with their spouse, putting the issues on the table, and begin the process of working toward resolution before it is too late. The fantasy, itself, can be a wake-up call, letting the partners know that all is not well on the home front.

When an affair has already been consummated, however, it is difficult to get through the pain and anguish of the betrayal to look at the nature of the relationship that may have set the stage for the affair. All too often, this examination is experienced by the betrayed party as putting the responsibility on him or her rather than on the unfaithful partner. Nonetheless, if a couple has decided that they want to remain together despite the affair, this examination becomes part of the healing process.

To be sure, it is much easier to turn one's back on a relationship that has been damaged by an affair than to move toward getting beyond the pain to examine the relationship. It takes considerable courage and determination to rebuild trust, examine one's own contribution to the state of the union, and to put in the required effort to make the relationship work. Similarly, it takes great humility on the part of the unfaithful party to face his or her shortcomings, character failings, and fears to overcome the guilt

for having inflicted such harm on one's partner, and move forward to earn forgiveness.

STAGES OF HEALING

According to Dr. Spring, there are three stages of healing:

Stage 1: Normalizing one's feelings. The betrayed partner is often flooded with a host of feelings. Almost any feeling that one has is normal. An affair leaves one feeling violated, alone, distrusting, and filled with self-doubt. Often there is a profound sense of loss, as though the very ground upon which one walks has been pulled out from under, leaving one suspended in space. There are many losses that one may experience: loss of faith, sense of specialness, self-respect, sense of purpose, to name a few. One may doubt one's sense of reality; one's fundamental beliefs may get thrown in to question. In short, someone who has been betrayed may no longer can be sure of his or her own sense of identity. While one may feel as though he or she is going crazy, they are not. All of these feelings and more are completely normal given the magnitude of the trauma experienced.

The unfaithful partner may also be filled with a variety of feelings. However, no matter how awful he or she might feel, it does not compare to what the betrayed partner feels. It is not nearly as shattering for the unfaithful partner as it is for the betrayed.

Stage 2: Deciding whether to recommit or quit. Some people may believe that once a partner strays, the relationship is over. They may also believe that once there has been a betrayal, rebuilding the trust is impossible. Taking this position, however, precludes the possibility that people can change, that people can

¹ Based, in part, on the book of the same title, *After the Affair*, by Janis Abrahm Spring, Ph.D., published by Harper Perennial in 1996

learn from their mistakes, and that something once broken can be repaired. Whatever one's beliefs, most psychologists would encourage people to avoid making decisions based on assumptions that are highly subjective, or based on a highly charged emotional state. What feels right while one's emotions are raw may not be what's right later.

Essentially there are four options: (a) to leave the relationship and not look back; (b) to remain in the marriage and never discuss or explore what happened; (c) to stay in the relationship and permit the affair to continue; and (d) to remain in the relationship working toward rebuilding trust, developing a more intimate relationship, and developing a plan for assuring that it won't happen again.

If one chooses the first option of leaving the relationship, he or she runs the risk of not having learned anything from the affair, thus risking repeating the same mistakes again in the future. One also runs the risk of leaving with a great deal of bitterness that may build-up as time goes on.

If one chooses to simply put the affair behind without discussing any of the factors that may have led to the affair, one runs the risk of living a life of constantly wondering whether it will happen again. All of one's questions are left unanswered; one learns nothing, and one leaves the ground fertile for it to happen again or for suspicion to build. Neither party has the opportunity to learn from the experience.

If one chooses to remain in the relationship and permit the affair to continue, one is virtually assuring himself or herself a life of resentment, guilt, anger, depression, and loss of self-respect. Unless both parties have agreed to a sexually open marriage, and have the maturity to carry it off responsibly, in the majority of cases where it has been tried this option has not proven to be viable.

The last option, that of remaining together and working toward rebuilding one's relationship, gives both parties the opportunity to learn from the experience. It has the greatest probability for strengthening the relationship and moving it forward.

Stage 3: Rebuilding one's relationship. Once one has made the decision to work with one's spouse toward rebuilding one's relationship, one must be realistic about what one expects. It will not be an easy road. The process involves a careful self examination and an honest look at the relationship on the part of both the betrayed and the unfaithful. In my experience, couples who have made this choice have always learned a great deal about themselves as well as about their partner. In order to maximize their learning, however, it is necessary for them to develop the necessary skills for doing so. Often it is necessary to consult with a trained mental health professional to facilitate the communication between the partners, especially in the often emotionally raw state immediately after the affair. The following suggestions can be helpful in developing the skills needed for effective communication.

*Communication Skills*². Being able to communicate is one of the greatest assets in any relationship; it is especially important when

trying to rebuild a relationship after an affair. And it is especially difficult when dealing with the emotionally charged experience of betrayal.

Often we believe we are saying one thing while the listener is hearing something entirely different. The listener is responding to their interpretation of what was said. Communication requires both good transmission skills (articulation) and good receptive skills (listening). Without both, communication will be, at best, difficult.

1. *Arrange for a convenient meeting time rather than trying to have a discussion when it is likely to be interrupted.*
2. *Find a "talking stick" (any small object will do). So long as one person is holding the stick, that person also holds the floor. Once the stick is passed, it becomes the other person's time to talk. This technique prevents interruptions.*
3. *Express your point, and then, passing the stick, ask your spouse to repeat what you said so that you can be certain that you were at least heard. If your partner is not able to repeat what you said, or you do not feel understood, repeat your point until you are satisfied.*
4. *The listener's job during this exercise is to be certain you understand and communicate that understanding to your spouse before you comment on the content of what you are being told.*
5. *Once your partner feels heard, then it becomes your turn to comment and be heard.*
6. *Continue this process until resolution, passing the "talking stick" and alternately being in the role of transmitter and receiver.*

This approach, often referred to as "active listening," can prevent misunderstandings and serve to keep emotions under control. It is difficult to react emotionally if you are truly listening and communicating understanding before responding.

Dr. Springer suggests five areas that need to be addressed in the process of rebuilding a relationship after an affair. These areas can be used as the basis for discussions between the partners. These areas include talking about what each has learned from the affair, discussing what is necessary to restore trust, talking about what happened that led to and resulted from the affair, exploring sexual attitudes and behaviors, and sharing what would be necessary for the hurt party to forgive.

LEARNING FROM THE AFFAIR

In order to maximize one's learning from the affair, one first has to take a hard look at herself or himself. This is often the most difficult part of this journey. The natural tendency is to want to point one's finger at the other partner. The unfaithful partner wants to blame the betrayed partner for causing him or her to stray. The hurt partner wants to put the total responsibility on the unfaithful partner. To be sure, the unfaithful partner bears the lion's share of responsibility for the affair, since no one can make anyone be unfaithful; it is a choice. However, to spend a great deal of time engaged in finger pointing will teach the parties nothing and only serve to maintain distance between them. The task here is not to argue about who bears most of the guilt,

² Adapted from "Making Your Marriage Work" in E. A. Dreyfus, *Keeping Your Sanity*, Xlibris, 2003.

but rather for each person to examine their portion of responsibility for how the relationship developed, and for the state of the union prior to the affair. The job is for each partner to examine their own baggage, their own issues, their own childhood experiences, their expectations, their assumptions, and what role each played in contributing to the difficulties in the relationship.

Each party can ask themselves the following: How have my childhood experiences affected my relationships today? How have I been damaged by infidelities in my own family? How are the qualities I dislike in my partner related to those I like or envy, and may be missing, in myself? How have stressful life events at the time of the affair knocked me off balance and contributed to my problems at home?

RESTORING TRUST

Trust is earned through action. It is not simply given, nor should it be expected. It must be earned through consistently providing an atmosphere where each party can feel safe. A trust is often considered sacred. And when it is violated, it is not easy to rebuild. Most of us have had experiences during our lives that either prepared us to trust easily or prepared us to believe that we should be guarded. For those who grew up in a safe, nurturing environment, where people honored their word, where they felt safe and protected, trust comes easily. For those who experienced environments that were not safe, where they could not count on others, trust does not come easily. Hence, just how much time, and what specific types of behaviors may be required to restore trust, once violated, will vary depending on the life experiences of the hurt party.

When we speak of trust in the context of an affair we are referring to the belief that your partner will remain faithful to you and not betray you again. Springer refers to another form of trust as well. Namely, that form of trust that says that if you “venture back into the relationship, your partner will address your grievances and not leave you regretting your decision to recommit.”

In order to rebuild trust with the hurt partner, the unfaithful partner will have to demonstrate that she or he is worthy of being trusted. This will require behavioral changes that may feel uncomfortable. The unfaithful partner may feel on trial; the truth is, he or she is on trial! He or she is being evaluated for trustworthiness. And it may take quite a long time to rebuild the trust; it is not an overnight process. In the aftermath of an affair, nothing can be taken for granted. The unfaithful partner will have to be conscious of her or his behavior 100% of the time. He or she will have to behave in ways that demonstrate love even when these feelings are not immediately felt. The unfaithful partner will have to answer the same questions repeatedly, until the hurt party is satisfied. He or she will have to live his or her life accountable to his or her partner, apprising the partner of his or her whereabouts, actions, and even thoughts. The unfaithful partner will have to commit to being 100% honest and candid; one contradiction can result in a significant setback, and widen the gap between the partners. The unfaithful partner must have a vision of how he or she wishes the relationship between the partners to be, and then do everything in his or her power to act in ways to create it.

TALKING ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED

There is no substitute for talking through the hurt, disappointment, and anger that results from an affair. Simply moving on, putting the past behind one, is not sufficient to healing a shattered relationship. A significant part of the healing process requires that both parties have the opportunity to talk about what happened, what they each experienced, and their respective understanding of the state of the relationship at the time. The hurt party needs to be able to express his or her hurt and anger and have the unfaithful partner truly listen and understand the magnitude of the damage caused. The unfaithful partner needs to share their dissatisfactions with the relationship, his or her state of mind at the time, and his or her confusion. Both partners need to be able to listen and fully understand the other's point of view even when it hurts to do so.

Each partner must be willing to be vulnerable. Each must be willing to be honest, personal, and deeply revealing about the affair and what it meant and what pain it caused. Now is the time for full disclosure. If one is going to rebuild the relationship, one cannot do so while maintaining secrets and telling lies and half-truths. It is a time to talk about grievances, shame, fear, sadness, hurt, rage, etc. It is a time for sharing and for listening.

SEX AGAIN

After an affair, resuming a normal sexual relationship may seem all but impossible. The hurt spouse often feels undesirable and may assume that the unfaithful partner would rather be with his or her lover. As much as the hurt partner wants assurances and physical closeness, he or she is apt to push the partner away, not wanting to be that vulnerable. There are the conflicting reactions of wanting closeness yet wanting to protect oneself. The unfaithful partner may still be in the throes of the break up with his or her lover and may miss the illicitness of the affair. Developing an intimate connection after an affair may take quite a while. It will be necessary to explore the assumptions that each may be making regarding the other's behavior. Before resuming sexual relations, learning to be comfortable in each other's physical presence, especially naked, may take time. It will not come naturally. It will take practice and conversations. Overcoming expectations and assumptions about sexuality will be part of the conversations. It is virtually impossible not to compare one's self or one's partner with the other member of the affair. Questions will emerge that need to be answered before more normal sexual relations can occur.

LEARNING TO FORGIVE

There are several important concepts to understand when it comes to forgiveness, especially after an affair. One has to forgive both him or herself and one's partner. There has to be redemption. Forgiveness does not mean forgetting.

Forgiving oneself and one's partner. The betrayed partner must forgive himself or herself for, among other things, blaming himself or herself for the partner's betrayal; for being naïve, ignoring one's suspicions, tolerating the partner's excuses for unacceptable behavior in order to preserve the relationship; having a poorly developed self-concept; and contributing to the partner's dissatisfaction at home.

The unfaithful partner must forgive herself or himself for feeling so needy; for exposing one's partner to life threatening disease; for blaming one's partner for one's own dissatisfaction; and for failing to confront one's partner with one's essential needs.

Redemption requires that the unfaithful partner makes a full disclosure of his or her transgressions and seeks to make amends to the betrayed partner. It is often very valuable for the unfaithful partner to put his or her amends in the form of a written contract, or vow of commitment, stating how he or she intends to honor the hurt partner. Spring refers to this as a "covenant of promises." "Promises mean little by themselves," she states, "but when they are coupled with specific, relevant behaviors, they can assure your partner of your continuing commitment to change."

Forgetting is not likely to occur; it should not be expected. Some people believe that with forgiveness there should be forgetting. One doesn't forget the traumas of his or her life, but one can come to terms with them. The fact that an affair took place

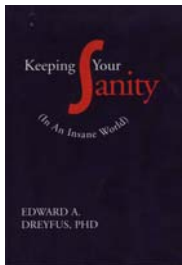
will not disappear. However, a great deal of the emotional charge associated with the affair can dissipate as one works through the various stages.

CONCLUSION

An affair can serve as a new beginning for couples that wish to rebuild their relationship on a new foundation. Just as a house that has been damaged by a tornado can often be rebuilt to be stronger and more enduring than it was, so can a relationship that has been damaged by an affair. It requires that the individuals involved make a whole-hearted commitment to do whatever is necessary to rebuild the trust, love, and intimacy between them. This rebuilding takes time and patience. Similar to rebuilding house, there is a lot of debris that needs to be cleaned up and sorted through before the actual building can occur. Most often, it requires outside consultation. It is not a process that can be undertaken lightly, and expert advice is necessary.

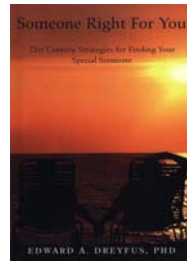
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