

Surviving the Trauma of Infidelity

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You don't have to be unhappily married to be vulnerable to an affair. Many people who see themselves as loving and devoted to their partners can still be tempted. Studies suggest that 44 percent of husbands and 25 percent of wives have had sexual relations outside marriage. "Infidelity can occur in any household, not just in situations where partners are promiscuous or rich and powerful. No marriage is immune," according to Shirley Glass, PhD, author of *Not Just Friends*.



The workplace has become the prime launching pad for modern infidelity, according to Glass. "Today's workplace is the most fertile breeding ground for affairs. The observed increase in women's infidelity is because more women are in the workplace and more women are in professions that were previously dominated by men."

Many of my colleagues believe that Glass' findings are important because it is so often believed that bad marriages cause affairs. It seems the truth is that affairs can cause a basically good marriage to turn bad more often than a bad marriage causes an affair. If you're in the public arena long enough, chances are you'll meet someone you're attracted to. Acting on that attraction can severely damage your marriage, but having an affair does not necessarily mean you don't love your partner.

The betrayed spouse may feel unfairly to blame for the affair, second-guessing herself or himself for not picking up on the clues. However, according to Glass' research, cheating partners often don't leave clues. Married sex will often get better during an outside affair, and unfaithful spouses will sometimes act quite devoted at home.

The Healing Process

"It's not the sex, it's the deception that destroys a marriage," according to Glass. The most difficult challenge after an affair is to heal the trauma of broken trust. As Glass says, "How can you trust anyone again who has looked into your eyes and lied to you?" Assuming that the couple does want to save the marriage, Glass believes the best way to heal is to have a full accounting of what happened. The spouse who has been betrayed has a right to know specifics, down to how they met, what they talked about, where they went, and who else knows about it. Such close examination not only de-energizes the secret infidelity, it helps re-establish intimacy in the marriage.

Recovering from infidelity is not easy. One third of marriages don't survive the affair. Because the work of full disclosure can be painful, it is best done in the safe confines of a therapist's office, and with a therapist who has special training in guiding couples. How much of the "nitty gritty" gets shared depends on what the betrayed spouse needs to know. Therapy usually consists of a combination of sessions in which both partners

are present, and individual sessions for each spouse. The goal is to rebuild trust and intimacy between the partners, to de-romanticize the infidelity for the involved spouse, and to work through the trauma of broken assumptions experienced by the betrayed spouse. With commitment, motivation, honest self-reflection, and professional guidance, energy can be restored to the marital bond, and the marriage can emerge even stronger than before the affair.