



A Complimentary Newsletter from the Desk of: Michael J. Alicea, M.S., M.S.W.

Marriage Report

Recovering from an Affair

By Michael J. Alicea, M.S., M.S.W.

Infidelity is more common than most people realize. In fact, it is estimated that 60% of men and 40% of women today will have an extramarital affair during their marriage. I decided to learn as much as I could about it so I could help my clients prevent it, or recover from it when it has already happened. In this newsletter, I will explore the forces that lead to infidelity and what must happen for couples to heal.

Forms of Infidelity

Infidelity takes many forms. Some people have *sequential affairs*—a series of one-night stands or short affairs. These affairs involve very little emotional investment and may be rationalized as harmless. There is always the danger of contracting a sexually transmitted disease. When such behavior continues for several years and finally is discovered, it is difficult to heal the years of deceit. Other affairs are *discrete events*. These also involve minimal emotional investment. Sometimes affairs last longer and become more serious. These affairs may be quite romantic and sexual. Sometimes they grow into more *serious relationships* and may last for years.

Why Affairs Happen

Infidelity happens for many reasons. Here are a few of the common explanations:

1. An affair may be a response to a crisis such as the death of someone important, moving to a new city, a job change, or some other kind of life transition.
2. Sometimes people become bored with their partners and seek sexual or emotional excitement with someone new. The new person seems to supply the excitement that has been missing.
3. Stressful times in the family life cycle lead some to seek escape in an affair. This includes things like taking care of aging parents, raising teenagers, and becoming new parents.
4. People sometimes look for outside relationships because their expectations of marriage have not been satisfied.
5. Some people seek outside relationships when their partners are emotionally unavailable because of illness.
6. Other people begin affairs because they seek more affection than their partner can provide.
7. Other people seek professional or social advancement.

There are also many social reasons why affairs happen: factors that exist in our society that lead many of us to expect a fantasy version of marriage that could never really exist. When marriage doesn't live up to this expectation, some of us keep looking for it outside of marriage.

Signs of Infidelity

The following signs indicate that your partner may be unfaithful. These are things that people have noticed before discovering that their partners were having affairs. None of the items by themselves mean that infidelity is about to happen, but they may be cause for concern if they are part of a larger pattern that is causing concern. These may apply to either men or women partners.

1. He has recently lost weight.
2. She has changed her hair color or hairstyle.
3. He begins wearing a different style of underwear.
4. She pays more attention to her clothing and appearance than she did in the past.
5. He begins using a different brand of soap or shampoo.
6. She uses breath mints, when she didn't use them in the past.
7. He stops wearing his wedding ring.
8. She wears more jewelry than she used to.
9. He buys a sports car.
10. She changes the position of the passenger car seat.
11. One number is repeated on the cellular phone bill.
12. He doesn't leave a number where he can be reached.
13. She gives vague answers about where she will be.
14. He has sudden work obligations that keep him from attending family events.
15. She begins attending more conferences.
16. He has more business dinners than he used to.
17. She has an extra key on her key ring.
18. He has restaurant matchbooks in his pocket.
19. There is lipstick or makeup on his shirt.
20. She often makes excuses to go out alone.
21. He goes for more workouts at the gym.
22. She smells like she just took a shower.
23. He seems emotionally distant or preoccupied.
24. She seems less interested in family activities.
25. He changes his sexual behavior, wanting either more or less.
26. You have a gut feeling that something is wrong.

Common Reactions to Infidelity

People who are involved in relationships in which their partner has been unfaithful say they have a wide range of reactions. These are a few of the common ones:

1. A physical reaction, such as feeling like you have been punched in the stomach.
2. Denying that anything is wrong.
3. Blaming yourself (I didn't pay enough attention to her; I wasn't sexy enough for him; I let myself get too fat, etc.).
4. Blaming your partner (I can't believe anything she says)
5. Blaming the relationship (We were too young; we were wrong for each other; we had different values, etc.).
6. Blaming the lover (It's his entire fault; if it weren't for him); transferring anger from one's spouse to one's lover.

Other Consequences of Infidelity

In addition to the emotional impact of infidelity, there may also be other consequences: sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancy, problems at work, and loss of relationships.

Recovery Strategies

Even though infidelity has a devastating impact on marriages, many do survive. Let's look at what it takes for a relationship to recover.

If You Were Unfaithful

If *you* had the affair and want to save your marriage:

1. Stop the affair and tell the truth about it.
2. Make the choice to practice fidelity.
3. Understand your partner's need to ask questions and understand what happened.
4. Spend plenty of time with your family.
5. Find a therapist and explore what has happened in your marriage.
6. Expect to reassure your partner of your commitment to the marriage.
7. Listen carefully to your partner and accept his or her feelings and thoughts.
8. Admit that you were wrong. Write a letter to your partner and admit everything. Let it all out.
9. Make amends. Identify what it would take for you to deserve forgiveness. Then, do it.

If Your Partner Was Unfaithful

If *your partner* had the affair and *you* want to save your marriage:

1. Acknowledge your anger and express it productively.
2. Be aware of distorted thoughts that may fuel your anger.
3. Watch out for negative beliefs that may make it harder for you to heal your relationship.
4. Find a way to explore and express your feelings, such as writing in a journal or working with a professional therapist.
5. Explore the advantages and disadvantages of saving your marriage.
6. Establish a safe environment where you can learn about what happened.
7. When you are ready, create a ritual for letting go of the anger and forgiving.

Prevention Steps

Finally, what are some things you can do to protect your marriage and keep it from becoming an infidelity statistic?

1. Pay attention to your partner. Be aware of his or her needs and do your best to meet them.
2. Think about how you behaved when you were trying to win your partner over. Do the same things now.
3. Make sex fun.

4. Look for opportunities to talk and listen.
5. Be thoughtful and romantic. Send cards, flowers, gifts.
6. Avoid high-risk situations. Discuss these with your partner and ask him or her to do the same.
7. Be polite to your partner.
8. Say nice things about your partner, in public and in private.
9. Spend regular private time together.
10. Greet your partner when he or she comes home.
11. Show that you are glad to see your partner. Be energized and pleasant.
12. Recommit to your values. Make the decision to live in keeping with what you believe is right.
13. Accept that you are responsible for your own well-being.
14. Be proactive about nurturing your marriage. This relationship is your most important investment; give it the time and attention it deserves.
15. Look for ways to express appreciation and respect.
16. Think of ways to enhance your partner's self-esteem.

Suggested Reading

Pittman, Frank, *Private Lies: Infidelity and the Betrayal of Intimacy*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989.

Staheli, Lana, *Affair-Proof Your Marriage: Understanding, Preventing and Surviving An Affair*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1995.

Subotnik, Rona and Harris, Gloria, *Surviving Infidelity: Making Decisions, Recovering from the Pain*. Holbrook, MA: Adams Publishing, 1994.

Vaughan, Peggy, *The Monogamy Myth*. New York, NY: Newmarket Press, 1989.

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