

Relationship Betrayal - and the Steps to Surviving it...

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You've met the person who makes you feel so special. It feels wonderful to be in love and now you are married hoping that this relationship will last your life time. Years have gone by and marriage has been good to you - so you thought. You begin to notice some different behaviours from you spouse which at first you ignore. For awhile you begin to wonder if something is going on but you brush it off. After all, the last thing you could ever imagine is that your spouse is having an affair. You don't even want to go there. You begin to piece some things together and your spouse denies everything until the day comes when your spouse gets caught in all their lies.

For those of us who have experienced situations like this, we know that **betrayal runs deep and can be devastating. Trust has been torn apart and the unthinkable has just happened.** Your life has just been thrown into a tail spin and probably your anxiety is making you feel sick. You may even want to get back at your spouse for the pain and humiliation you are now going through. Possibly the only thing you can think of is how to get even so your partner will hurt as much as you do. Is it possible to heal from the pain and humiliation of betrayal and adultery? Is it possible to forgive someone who has hurt you so badly?

Betrayal happens to everyone at some point in our lives. Betrayal can occur with a spouse, a family member, a best friend or a co-worker. Most people who experience betrayal saw the signs, but continue to give that person the benefit of the doubt. **The reality is that people will fail you.** Only 25% of all betrayal occurs with absolutely no forewarning. This is by far the most difficult type of betrayal because it leaves you shell shocked and devastated.

Betrayal is an interpersonal trauma which shatters assumptions about how we view life and the people close to us. Shattered assumptions leave us feeling as though our reality has been blown apart. When we are betrayed our feelings alternate between a sense of numbness and feelings of disbelief. We may also find ourselves behaving erratically and not like our usual selves. We feel victimised and our lives seem to be out of control.

So how do we heal from being betrayed? We begin by developing the skills to deal with strong negative emotions and to talk more effectively about the impact the betrayal had.

This may require setting appropriate boundaries with each other, learning how to deal with emotions effectively and expressing how you feel about the infidelity. Next you look at both the current and the developmental issues within yourselves and within your relationship that may have contributed to the affair. Usually both parties have an idea as to why the affair may have happened but they are **often unaware of the deeper or unacknowledged needs or motives from their partner's past history which may be impacting on current behaviors.** Gaining this new understanding **often results in an increase in compassion for the partner and tolerance of his or her flaws.**

Finally, as a couple begins to understand why the affair happened, they need to **evaluate the viability of their relationship, the potential for change, and their commitment to work together.** This is when the process of forgiveness becomes the focus of intervention. **No matter if you choose to stay or leave, because of other circumstances you may always be in some form of relationship.** Therefore it is **important to heal the emotional rift between yourselves as best you can.** This is why forgiveness is so important.

Let's now look at how you can heal from being betrayed.

Step 1: Face Your Feelings

While every situation is unique there are certain things that we can do to lessen the pain. Once the betrayal is revealed an emotional roller coaster ride begins. You more than likely will get swept up in an emotional whirlwind of anger, fear and a sense of loss. Realize that you are not going crazy. Others have experienced the same pain and confusion and have survived. Remember that you are not alone. I want to assure you that what you are experiencing is a normal and an appropriate response to an acutely traumatizing experience. You're reeling not only from the loss of the integrity of your relationship, but also from the loss of an illusion – that you're special to your partner, and that the intimacy you thought you shared with that person would last forever. In the face of such shattering news, it would be strange if you didn't feel lost. This may seem paradoxical but once we acknowledge and walk through our pain, only then does the pain begin to dissipate. This is where a counselor can really help. Talking to someone who listens to you and can be supportive in a healthy way can help you sort out what needs to happen.

Step 2: Gain control of you Emotions

As you try to unscramble what has happened to you, both your thoughts and actions may spin out of control. You're likely to become more obsessive, dwelling on your partner's lies, the details of the betrayal and the events that led to it. You may become more compulsive at work and other things you do, pushing harder and more frenetically to diffuse your anxiety. These distractions may serve as a temporary antidote to feelings of anxiety or emptiness, but if you want to put yourself back together, you need to slow down, confront your pain, figure out why the affair happened, and decide what you want to do about it. Instead of hanging on to the "story" of your betrayal, give yourself permission to heal. Look beneath your emotional reactions and ask yourself, what are my emotions really telling me? What needs to change and what can I do to take those necessary steps. You can not change what has happened to you but you do need to take responsibility for how you are handling the situation now.

Step 3: Ask yourself "Should I stay or Leave?"

Once the betrayal is out in the open, you will need to decide whether to work on rebuilding your relationship or end it. You will need to confront your ambivalence about whether to stay or leave the relationship. Which ever route you take, you need to chose it deliberately and not act on your feelings alone. Feelings, no matter how intense, are based on assumptions that are often highly subjective and may prove to be unrealistic, not useful or untrue. What feels right to you now you may later regret as an impulsive and unprocessed response that can't be easily reversed. By exploring your options, you will be able to make a thoughtful decision based on your circumstances and needs. "What can I expect from love?" "Should I trust my feelings?" "How can I tell if my partner is right for me?" These are just some of the questions to be asking yourself. A counselor can help you sort out your answers.

Two of your options will take you down a dead end. The first option is to stay together and never address why the betrayal happened or work to assure that it will never happen again. This is a ticket to disaster, creating a larger gulf between you leading to a life of quiet desperation.

The second option is for you to stay together, with at least one of you continuing to be unfaithful, only to have the other continually fighting depression and building up enormous rage. Needless to say this is a very unhealthy option built on a lot of dysfunction and clearly indicating a lack of self-love. In all my experience as a therapist working with couples, I have never known a prolonged affair to do anything but undermine a couple's efforts to seriously address the intimacy defects in their relationship.

This leaves only two viable alternatives. One is the decision to accept what has just happened and make a commitment to work on improving your relationship. The blind spot here is for the hurt partner to go in denial about the relationship because of an unwarranted attachment to the spouse that makes you want to stay together, no matter how dysfunctional the relationship is. What the betrayed person falls to see is

how unloving your partner has been toward you, how poorly you continue to be treated, and how nothing you do will change this.

The other alternative is to say goodbye and begin building separate lives. The danger for the unfaithful partner is that you may be drawn blindly to your lover and insist on being with this person no matter what. We may call it romantic love but in actuality it is an intense but unwarranted attachment that the unfaithful partner may feel towards their new lover. Unfortunately this kind of attachment is likely to make the unfaithful partner leave their spouse no matter how satisfying your life had been together.

Step 4: Learn from the Affair

So often we blame our partner for what goes wrong and fail to see the link between our personal, lifelong conflicts and the conflicts in our relationship – between the damage we carry within ourselves and the damage we experience as a couple. In attempting to assign responsibility for the infidelity, hurt partners tend to think, “You were screwing around with someone else. Don’t blame me.” Unfaithful partners tend to think, “You weren’t there for me; you drove me away.” Both of you are likely to insist on your own, perhaps self-serving, certainly contradictory and often oversimplified versions of the same conflict.

Instead of blaming yourself for your partners’ betrayal, appreciate your worth, know you are enough just as you are, and recognize that the betrayal had little to do with you. On the flip side, if you’re stuck in a cycle of intense anger and blame towards your partner, you need to decide if you can start to let go and rebuild your relationship, or if it’s time to walk away and move on. To help you decide whether to stay or go, it is helpful to understand the origins of the betrayal. Most people who cheat and/or betray in some other way suffer from low self-esteem. They may have a high need for acceptance and approval. If your partner fits this description, you need to decide if you can deal with and heal from the betrayal or if you need to leave your partner in order to recover. Either way, it’s essential to stop taking the betrayal personally. Instead, free yourself from the blame game, live in the present, and move forward with productive, positive thoughts.

Step 5: Restore Trust

One of the most devastating aspects of betrayal is the break down of trust. Once trust is broken it can be very difficult to rebuild it and it must be earned back. To restore trust actions speak louder than words. Feeling safe becomes paramount here. If the person who has been betrayed can not feel safe, trust can not be built. The betrayer needs to demonstrate with concrete actions that “I’m committed to you. You are safe with me.” The person who has been hurt needs to open up to the possibility of trusting again and reinforce the efforts of the other person. You can’t punish nor be cold and distant forever, or our partner will give up trying to reconnect. You need to tell your partner what you need to give this person a way back into your life.

When I speak of trust I am not only referring to the belief that your partner will remain faithful to you. I am also talking about the trust essential to you both, that if you venture back into the relationship, your partner will address your grievances and not leave you regretting your decision to recommit.

While it’s easy to fall into the betrayal trap of massive mistrust towards your partner moving forward, be aware that projecting your fears will not help you heal. If you plan to stay with your partner, you’ll need to focus on rebuilding trust. If you can’t forgive, then don’t waste time staying in the relationship and trying to make your partner pay for their past transgressions. Instead, give yourself the opportunity to pick up the pieces and start again. Start by learning to trust yourself and your life choices. Instead of focusing on your ex and the betrayal (not to mention past relationship disappointments that may be adding up to a mistrust in yourself right about now), think about all the amazing people in your life who you can trust, including yourself. Make a list of ten fantastic choices and decisions you’ve made in the last few years. Reflect on the people who have kept your confidences, honored their word, and stuck by your side.

Soon, you'll be slaying the beast of betrayal and going from victim to victor. Plus, by slowly and steadily rebuilding trust with your partner (or simply with yourself if you leave the relationship), you're better able to let go of fear, doubt, and insecurity.

The process of restoring trust can take a lifetime, but this doesn't mean you will have to struggle with trust issues on a daily basis. Your relationship is likely to feel fragile and tentative for several years after the affair is revealed, but during that time you can expect to experience many reassuring, joyous moments as well. Trust is delicate and can only be earned over time through commitment and continued effort. With trust comes the knowledge that "I can give myself to you knowing that you won't harm me – that you'll support me in what matters to me. I can open myself up to love you because I feel safe with you and valued by you.

Step 6: Find Forgiveness

Forgiveness is considered the highest form of love that we are capable of giving. If this is true it is no wonder that we have such a hard time forgiving someone who has betrayed us and even in forgiving ourselves. To aid us in learning how to forgive it is helpful to understand what forgiveness means and what it's not. Forgiveness is a voluntary act in which you make a decision to see a situation differently. Forgiveness helps us change the way we think so instead of seeing a situation through the lens of anger, guilt or fear we see it through the eyes of compassion and understanding. Instead of getting stuck in your own emotional baggage you can now see the situation differently with greater wisdom and understanding. That's forgiveness.

I like to think of forgiveness as the science of the heart, a discipline of discovering all the ways of being that will extend your love to the world and discarding all the ways that do not. It is the accomplishment of mastery over a wound. Forgiveness is a process through which an injured person first fights off, then embraces, then conquers a situation that has nearly destroyed him or her. On a deeper level forgiveness is about changing the way we think which includes embracing our humanity and spiritual nature and the humanity and spiritual nature of all human beings.

Forgiveness is not about pardoning. It is about our inner emotional release. Forgiveness is not condoning. We do not have to accept someone else's behavior in order to forgive. Forgiveness is not reconciliation. We can forgive someone, but it does not mean we have to reconcile. On a very practical level forgiveness is about lessening your own emotional burdens and healing the pain of your heart. Forgiveness is not about letting someone off the hook. It is about your own inner healing.

It takes a generous spirit to understand that people do not always hurt us because they choose to. Oftentimes, they have no more control over their actions than we, their victims, do. Only from our wisdom and compassion can we recognise that when people harm us, it is their weaknesses that compel them to act. People who attack us act out of fear to protect themselves. Fear drives us into a hard shell. It shuts the door on our capacity to understand, empathise, and love, while allowing distrust and enmity to guard against being touched from the outside world. To compensate for this perception, we often harden ourselves so that others cannot gain access to our inner selves or discover our shortcomings.

Forgiveness is a process that happens over time. Before we can truly forgive, we need to realise that forgiveness is about our inner healing and not necessarily about behavioral change. Until we totally understand that we may needlessly deal with resistance about forgiving someone. We heal by remembering, by bringing back into our awareness everything we have kept hidden from ourselves. It takes time to bring these pieces together. This process begins by telling our story and validating our feelings and experiences. Only after time and being in a safe environment can we allow ourselves to feel and express our strong emotions and to explore the issues concerning our pain and circumstances. As we become more aware and accepting of all our emotions as valid messengers about our interaction in the world, we begin our healing. If we are holding onto something, we need to recognise that, despite

any other person's role in creating the situation, we are responsible for what we do with our hurt. Forgiveness is about accepting responsibility for our emotional reactions to our hurt.

What may be harder than forgiving your partner is forgiving yourself. No matter if you are the one who has been hurt or you are the one who has hurt looking within yourself and dealing with the guilt of the past is no easy process. Yet, if we do not do this kind of soul searching and inner work our outer world may be superficial at best. If you have been betrayed you may be blaming yourself too harshly for your partner's betrayal. You may have contributed to your partner's dissatisfaction for example by getting buried in your career or in the needs of your children. When you take a look at these issues and take responsibility for them you will be able to let go of your guilt and move on.

If you are the betrayer, you are solely responsible for your deception and need to forgive yourself for the harm you have caused by violating your covenant of trust. You may also need to look at the hurt you have caused your children. By taking responsibility for your actions and making different choices you heal guilt and move forward. Remember that holding on to your guilt is a choice too. Self-forgiveness doesn't relieve you of responsibility for your words or actions, but it releases you from self-contempt. With self-forgiveness, you bring compassion and understanding of who you are and why you acted the way you did, and reclaim what you most value in yourself.

Step 7: Hope and Renewal

Sometimes you need to take something apart to rebuild it in a stronger, more lasting way. Erik Erikson, a well known psychologist has said, "A crisis can be a turning point; by making you vulnerable it can heighten your potential for positive change. Sometimes it takes the threat of losing something to make you realize its value. Until you feel compelled to leave, you may not realize you are happy where you are and want to stay. Carl Jung, a famous psychoanalyst also commented, "Seldom or never does a marriage develop smoothly and without crisis. There is no birth of consciousness without pain."

And so it is with intimate relationships. We often enter into them blindly swept up with passion and an idealised perception of who our partner is. Most of us are totally unprepared for what lies ahead, and ignorant of what is required of us to stay the course. We may think that we know what it takes but the truth is that most of us are clueless. The affair shocks us into reality. It also gives us the opportunity to try again.