

WELL

When a Partner Cheats

Personal Health

By JANE E. BRODY JAN. 22, 2018

Marriages fall apart for many different reasons, but one of the most common and most challenging to overcome is the discovery that one partner has “cheated” on the other.

I put the word cheated in quotes because the definition of infidelity can vary widely among and within couples. Though most often it involves explicit sexual acts with someone other than one’s spouse or committed partner, there are also couples torn asunder by a partner’s surreptitious use of pornography, a purely emotional relationship with no sexual contact, virtual affairs, even just ogling or flirting with a nonpartner.

Infidelity is hardly a new phenomenon. It has existed for as long as people have united as couples, married or otherwise. Marriage counselors report that affairs sometimes occur in happy relationships as well as troubled ones.

According to the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, national surveys indicate that 15 percent of married women and 25 percent of married men have had extramarital affairs. The incidence is about 20 percent higher when emotional and sexual relationships without intercourse are included. As more women began working outside the home, their chances of having an affair have increased accordingly.

Volumes have been written about infidelity, most recently two excellent and illuminating books: “The State of Affairs: Rethinking Infidelity” by Esther Perel, a New York psychotherapist, and “Healing from Infidelity” by Michele Weiner-Davis, a psychotherapist in Boulder, Colo. Both books are based on the authors’ extensive experience counseling couples whose relationships have been shattered by affairs.

The good news is, depending upon what caused one partner to wander and how determined a couple is to remain together, infidelity need not result in divorce. In fact, Ms. Perel and other marriage counselors have found, couples that choose to recover from and rebuild after infidelity often end up with a stronger, more loving and mutually understanding relationship than they had previously.

“People who’ve been betrayed need to know that there’s no shame in staying in the marriage — they’re not doormats, they’re warriors,” Ms. Weiner-Davis said in an interview. “The gift they provide to their families by working through the pain is enormous.”

Ms. Perel concedes that “some affairs will deliver a fatal blow to a relationship.” But she wrote, “Others may inspire change that was sorely needed. Betrayal cuts to the bone, but the wound can be healed. Plenty of people care deeply for the well-being of their partners even while lying to them, just as plenty of those who have been betrayed continue to love the ones who lied to them and want to find a way to stay together.”

The latter was exactly the position a friend of mine found herself in after discovering her husband’s affair. “At first I wanted to kick him out,” she told me. “But I realized that I didn’t want to get divorced. My mother did that and she ended up raising three children alone. I didn’t want a repeat of my childhood. I wanted my son, who was then 2 years old, to have a father in his life. But I also knew that if we were going to stay together, we had to go to couples counseling.”

About a dozen sessions later, my friend came away with critical insights: “I know I’m not perfect. I was very focused on taking care of my son, and my husband wasn’t getting from me whatever he needed. Everybody should be allowed to make mistakes and learn from them. We learned how to talk to each other and really listen. I love him and respect him, I’m so happy we didn’t split apart. He’s a

wonderful father, a stimulating partner, and while our marriage isn't perfect — whose is? — we are supportive and nurturing of each other. Working through the affair made us stronger.”

As happened with my friend, most affairs result from dissatisfaction with the marital relationship, fueled by temptation and opportunity. One partner may spend endless hours and days on work, household chores, outside activities or even social media, to the neglect of their spouse's emotional and sexual needs. Often betrayed partners were unaware of what was lacking in the relationship and did not suspect that trouble was brewing.

Or the problem may result from a partner's personal issues, like an inability to deal with conflict, a fear of intimacy, deep-seated insecurity or changes in life circumstances that rob the marital relationship of the attention and affection that once sustained it.

But short of irreversible incompatibility or physical or emotional abuse, with professional counseling and a mutual willingness to preserve the marriage, therapists maintain that couples stand a good chance of overcoming the trauma of infidelity and avoiding what is often the more painful trauma of divorce.

Ms. Weiner-Davis points out that “except in the most severe cases such as ongoing physical abuse or addiction,” divorce often creates more problems than it solves, an observation that prompted her to write her first book, “Divorce Busting.”

Ms. Weiner-Davis readily admits that recovering from infidelity is hard work and the process cannot be rushed. Yet, as she wrote in her new book, “many clients have shared that had it not been for their partner's affair, they'd never have looked at, discussed, and healed some of the underlying issues that were broken at the foundation of their relationship.”

Rather than destroying the marriage, the affair acted as a catalyst for positive changes, Ms. Weiner-Davis maintains. In her new book, she outlines tasks for both the betrayed spouse and the unfaithful one that can help them better understand and meet the emotional and physical needs of their partners.

Both she and Ms. Perel have found that, with the benefit of good counseling, some couples “divorce” their old marriages and start anew with a relationship that is more honest and loving.

It is important to find a therapist who can help the couple weather the many ups and downs that are likely to occur in working through the issues that lead to infidelity, Ms. Weiner-Davis said. “If they expect setbacks and are willing to work through them, the odds are good that they’ll end up with a healed marriage.”

“Infidelity is a unique situation that requires unique therapeutic skills,” she said. She suggested that in selecting a therapist, couples ask if the therapist has any training and experience in treating infidelity and how successful the therapist has been in helping marriages heal.

A version of this article appears in print on January 23, 2018, on Page D5 of the New York edition with the headline: The Hard Road Back From Infidelity.
