

The Process of an Affair:
A Healing Journey

A three-stage process following the disclosure of an affair has been described by Olson, Russell, Higgins-Kessler, and Miller (2002). The three stages are:

- Roller Coaster
- Moratorium
- Trust-Building

Roller Coaster

Initial responses to a partner's disclosure of infidelity are often intensely emotionally charged. It is during this phase that many of the negative outcomes of the affair can be most apparent. There may be moments of extreme anger, and moments when there is a deepened appreciation for spouse and family amidst the current of strong negative emotions.

Moratorium

This stage is characterized by less emotional reactivity and attempts to make meaning of the infidelity. The moratorium often involves obsessing about details, retreating both physically and emotionally, and recruiting the support of others in an effort to make meaning of the infidelity. Sometimes, the injured partner wants to know more about the "other" person. Couple communication is usually based around family "business", such as visitation with the children. Emotional flare-ups may still occur. The support, expectations, and advice of others often serve as a factor in keeping couples together. Commitment to marriage and family can be a very strong motivating factor for healing.

Trust-Building

The process of reengagement involves greater openness in the relationship. This can mean being totally honest even if that honesty hurts the other person. A focus on the relationship problems, not only the affair, is an important way of reengaging.

Injured partners need to experience remorsefulness from the offending partner throughout the various stages of the healing process. Words of apology and acceptance of responsibility, as well as addressing the relationship troubles that led to the affair are crucial.

The injured partner can notice the steps the partner is taking to demonstrate commitment to the relationship. For example, the offending partner can ask, "What can I do to save us?" The return of loving behaviours that were common earlier in the relationship can make a difference. The offending partner can also take action to remove suspicion that he/she is being unfaithful (e.g., be on time, call home, never be alone with another man/woman, etc.).

Increased communication and sharing of feelings are usually indicative of increased commitment. It can be beneficial for the couple to discuss what each person wants out of the marriage. Setting a specific time aside, and talking alone, can help.

Forgiveness is an important step in the healing process.

Forgiveness

Hargrave (1994) describes four stations of forgiveness:

- Insight
- Understanding
- Giving Opportunity for Compensation
- Overt Acts of Forgiving

Violations of trust and love can involve emotions of shame and rage. These emotions can contribute to attempts to overcontrol the relationship as well as give up all control. This position is called chaos. People may alternate in cycles of shame and rage, control and chaos. An emotional *roller coaster* can ensue.

McCullough et al. (1997) defines forgiveness as a motivational transformation that inclines people to inhibit relationship-destructive responses and to behave constructively toward someone who has behaved destructively toward them. Empathy is crucial to the development of forgiveness and conciliatory behaviours. Indicators of empathy include the demonstration of sympathy, concern, compassion, warmth, and tenderness.

Gordon and Baucom (1998) have created a model that frames betrayal as a traumatic event to which the injured party may respond with symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). They describe the three stages of betrayal as follows: Impact, Definition, and Moving Forward.

Impact

- A stage that is also called Eye opener/Roller coaster
- Confrontation & intense statement of feelings (anger, punishment, guilt)
- May include “acts of revenge”
- Injured partner needs to gather information
- Injured partner reconstructs understanding of partner & relationship
- May involve repression, numbness, denial and shattered self-esteem

Definition

- Moratorium characterized by withdrawal and time alone
- Meaning-making as partners makes sense out of what happened
- Hyper-vigilance and acts of revenge can also be involved

Moving Forward

- Trust-building includes behaviours such as offering apologies
- Offending partner can become more accountable throughout the day
- Offending partner can make tasks for the good of the family a priority

Advice For Couples From Those Who Have Survived An Affair

*Really listen to one another, to try and really understand where they are coming from.
Don't hold anything back, but at the same time don't yell and scream.*

Find someone to talk to outside of the marriage.

Stay around positive people.

Don't make any quick decisions.

If you choose to forgive someone, forgive them. You can't constantly bring it up.

Couples who have survived an affair emphasize the importance of continuing to talk, finding outside support, going slowly, and offering forgiveness.

Positive Outcomes

- Developing a closer marital relationship
- Becoming more assertive
- Placing a higher value on family
- Taking better care of oneself
- Realizing the importance of good marital communication

Olson, M. M., Russell, C. S., Higgins-Kessler, M., & Miller, R. B. (2002). Emotional processes following disclosure of an extramarital affair. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 28, 423-434.