

Family Health

Marital Infidelity: Can Your Relationship Be Saved?

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Relationship Specialist Dr. Daniel Watter Offers Tips on Coping with Unfaithfulness



(HealthNewsDigest.com) - Parsippany, NJ, January 2014 - There is no shortage of strains on a marriage - financial worries, health issues, child-rearing conflicts and more. But nothing undermines the very foundation of a marriage like infidelity. "A spouse's unfaithfulness causes devastating pain and disruption that cannot be easily overcome," says Dr. Daniel Watter, clinical psychologist and relationship specialist with Morris Psychological Group. "Yet divorce is not inevitable following the revelation of infidelity. Many married people who cheat have become dissatisfied with their own lives or with the current state of their marriage but don't necessarily want out. With time and a mutual commitment to rebuilding the relationship - and often with professional help - many marriages can actually become stronger following infidelity."

There are many reasons for infidelity. Even the definition of what constitutes infidelity varies. An emotional attachment without physical intimacy - including an online relationship - may seem less threatening but can be more damaging than an affair based primarily on sex. "Infidelity can afflict happy marriages as well as troubled ones," says Dr. Watter, "and while sex - or more accurately, the excitement and romance of a new relationship - is the driving factor in some cases, dissatisfaction with themselves or their lives is more often what drives the straying partner."

Whatever the motivation for infidelity, repairing the relationship after an affair comes to light is dependent on rebuilding trust. But before that process can begin, there must be clarity as to whether the couple is committed to the relationship. One or both partners may be ambivalent about wanting to stay in the marriage. "Often counseling is needed to help people sort out their feelings, which are likely to be confused and conflicted," Dr. Watter says. "Sometimes it becomes clear that the goal of counseling should be to effect a constructive separation. But if the couple is resolved to reconcile, we encourage them to work through a series of steps that will lead to forgiveness and the re-establishment of trust."

Tips for Coping with Infidelity

Dr. Watter identifies three stages as a couple rebuilds their relationship after infidelity. In the first stage of recovery, the partners must manage the pain that accompanies discovery of the affair and the affair must come to a definitive end.

- **Don't make hasty decisions.** The strong emotions triggered in both partners by the disclosure of an affair - shock, rage, betrayal, guilt, remorse - do not foster a positive environment for making important decisions about the future of the relationship. Both parties need to step back and take the time to sort out their feelings before deciding how to move forward. This is the time to seek support, preferably with a professional counselor trained in marital therapy.
- **Make a commitment to honesty.** The secrecy that surrounded the affair must end as must all vestiges of the affair itself. That means breaking off all contact with the third party, not just ending the sexual relationship. If the affair partner was a co-worker, as is often the case, interactions must be strictly business - no personal confidences, no lunches - and unavoidable or accidental contact must be discussed with the spouse to rebuild trust.

In the second stage, as the trauma of discovery recedes, the couple can explore the conditions that led to the affair, whether within or external to the marital relationship.

- **Discuss the affair openly.** At the time of discovery, the betrayed spouse often insists on knowing the circumstances and even the details of the affair but only when the initial trauma has subsided can more complex questions of motivation be addressed: Has the romance gone out of the marriage? Are needs not being met? Does one partner have unrealistic or idealized notions of what he or she wants in the relationship? Is one partner blaming the other for dissatisfaction with aspects of his or her own life? It is important to address not just problems in the relationship but also for each partner to confront his or her own problems.
- **Give it time.** The unfaithful spouse, having acknowledged and ended the affair, may be anxious to move beyond it but the wronged partner must be able to take the time to regain trust and must be the one to set the timetable for recovery.

Finally, understanding the vulnerabilities that led to the affair, the couple can reset their relationship and be more attuned to each others' needs going forward. "Forgiveness isn't easy and it takes time but it is possible," Dr. Watter concludes. "Forgiveness doesn't mean forgetting. In fact, couples can't and shouldn't forget what happened. But they can and must learn from it and even use it as the foundation for building a stronger, more open and more enduring relationship."

Daniel N. Watter, Ed.D. specializes in the treatment of individuals and couples experiencing sexual and/or relationship problems. Morris Psychological Group, P.A. offers a wide range of therapy and evaluation services to adults, children and adolescents. www.morrispsych.com