

## HOW TO HANDLE YOURSELF AFTER YOUR PARTNER HAS AN AFFAIR

As a relationship counselor, I see individuals as well as couples dealing with relationship and sexual issues. One of those issues is infidelity. Sometimes people want to see me because they're afraid they may stray because they're unhappy, or because they have strayed and aren't sure where to go from there. Sometimes the one who has been cheated on has found out (e-mail and the internet are very instrumental in this) and is trying to figure out whether to stay in the relationship or leave.

First off, let's be clear: IT HURTS! It just hurts! Everybody hurts deeply: the one who feels betrayed, as well as the one who strayed. But there is a way to heal and come back from this.

One assumption is that one person is wrong and the other is a victim. That's a little short-sighted, and does not reflect an empowered stance. Most people enter into relationship with the assumption of monogamy without ever discussing the matter.

There are always very good reasons why couples have the difficulties they have. You may not see any good reasons why you were cheated on right now, but relationship difficulties *always* make perfect sense. I invite you to be curious about how your predicament makes sense. You can still blame and make the other wrong to alleviate your pain if you need to, but don't let that exclude a dose of self-examination.

People who have been cheated on usually want to distract themselves by speculating and perseverating about why the offender was unfaithful: fear of commitment, an overriding need for validation (from someone other than you, let alone themselves), lack of ability to create what they really want in the relationship, thrill seeking, yearning for 'freedom', being in pain and just wanting something/somebody to make them feel better, anxiety/sex addiction... While some of these reasons may be accurate, focusing on the other person rather than yourself is not empowering. So what can *you* do after your partner has had an affair?

This may be a good time to remind you that it's not personal. Your partner didn't stray because you're not attractive enough, fat or thin enough, rich enough, acrobatic enough in bed... They strayed because they are out of integrity with themselves, and because they chose to prioritize something else over commitment. That's their stuff. Back to you.

I recommend starting by asking yourself how you might have, consciously or unconsciously, contributed to the dynamic that led to the affair. Remember, it always makes sense.

One dynamic that can lead to infidelity is when one partner feels consistently pushed away by the other. This can be in the form of being made wrong a lot, being kept at arms' length emotionally, not being or feeling appreciated, lack of affection... Do you recall behaving in ways that may have led to your partner feeling pushed away?

There's also the slow eroding that comes from not talking about what matters. Did you notice something that didn't quite feel right, but didn't want to talk about it, hoping that it would go away all

by itself? This is a popular though ineffective strategy that comes back to haunt people, and eventually causes bigger problems.

Another dynamic arises when one person does not want to be sexual. He or she may have very good reasons for that and it doesn't mean anybody is broken or needs to be fixed. At the same time it does not automatically ensue that one's mate should give up partnered sexual activity. I'm not suggesting that if one partner doesn't wish to be sexual that the other is justified in seeking sex elsewhere, but that mutual honesty and respect can help to create a win-win agreement. Where there is trust and a willingness to face both peoples' truth, much more is possible. This is the crux of how you might want to handle yourself.

Understanding the dynamics of your relationship, identifying ways that you have been deceiving yourselves and maybe each other, owning the impediments to honesty, paying attention to the signs of potential trouble, and being scrupulously honest with yourself are the keys to moving through this painful time in your relationship.

Once you've figured out how you might have contributed to a dynamic that resulted in one or both partners fooling around elsewhere, you have to screw up your courage and have those conversations that seem the most risky to have, but that actually have the most potential to enrich your relationship and intimacy (and I don't mean that as a euphemism for sex, but it will improve your sex life together too.) An honest relationship takes two people who are willing to speak their truth, kindly and compassionately, as well as hear the other's truth. It's rich stuff, if you can stomach it. You may also come to the conclusion that you are just not the best fit for each other and end the relationship. But I guarantee that whatever issues remain unresolved in this relationship, you will have to deal with again in the next one. I don't make this up. That's how it works. Whatever decision you make, make it from the best in you, not the worst in you.

So after an affair, I invite you to be scrupulously honest with yourself and choose growth, however hurt you may feel. Give yourself that gift.