Recovery from Infidelity
(A Healing Process)

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Carrie Underwood - Before He Cheats - YouTube.mht
The most comprehensive and recent statistics regarding the proportion of married individuals that have engaged in extramarital sex shows that in a national sample of over 3000 adults, 25% of men and 15% of women reported having sex with someone other than his or her spouse while married (Laumann, Gagnon, Michaels, & Michaels, 2003).
In a study of divorced men and women, 40% of men and 44% of women reported having more than one extramarital sexual contact during their marriages (Janus & Janus, 2003).
Negative Consequences of Infidelity:

- The negative consequences of infidelity include:
  - Loss of trust, damaged self-esteem, disruption to other relationships such as the relationships with:
    - Children
    - Friends
    - Parents
    - Financial consequences
    - Suffering from emotional problems, and
    - Divorce

Amato & Rogers, 1997; Charny & Parnass, 1995; & Schneider, Irons & Corley, 1999
Infidelity:

- Infidelity is reported to be among the most difficult relationship issues to treat in couples’ therapy and is the most frequently cited cause of divorce.

  Amato & Rogers, 1997; Atkins, Baucom & Jacobson, 2001; Charny & Parnass, 1995; Schneider, Irons & Corley, 1999; Whisman, Dixon, & Johnson, 1997; Winek & Craven, 2003
Recovery from Infidelity:

- Researchers and clinicians report that recovery from infidelity can occur;
- Committed partnerships can survive the trauma of infidelity, and
- Personal growth in the wake of infidelity is possible.
Recovery from Infidelity (Defined):

- Recovery from infidelity is defined as reported personal growth and increased relationship satisfaction.

Amato & Rogers, 1997; Charny & Parnass, 1995; & Schneider, Irons & Corley, 1999
Predictors of Recovery from Infidelity:

- Forgiveness, degree of trauma, and differentiation of self from the family of origin will be predictors of recovery from infidelity.
Infidelity (Defined):

- Infidelity is defined as sexual intercourse during a committed relationship with someone other than the primary partner.

Blow and Harnett’s (2005a)
Literature Review:

- The majority of our information on infidelity comes from books and articles written by clinicians regarding their observations after treating or interviewing clients who have dealt with infidelity.
- A smaller amount of information also comes from research studies conducted on individuals’ experiences following infidelity.
Surviving Infidelity:

- Couples can survive infidelity if the individuals are willing to look honestly at themselves and acquire the skills necessary to recover from the crisis (Spring, 1996)
- Couples can survive infidelity by achieving new levels of trust, honesty, and communication. (Lusterman, 1998)
In Order to Heal (Infidelity):

- Clinicians have written about what they believe couples should do in order to heal their relationship and many models have been developed as tools to help individuals’ recovery from infidelity during therapy.
Treatment Models:
Lusterman Treatment Model (1998):

- Created a “survival guide” for couples dealing with infidelity.
- Developed a three-stage model to recovery based on restoring:
  - Trust,
  - Reviewing the marriage, and
  - Creating a better marriage.
Halford and Markman Treatment Model (1997):

- The. Developed an interpersonal trauma model for clinicians to use when working with couples who are trying to reconstruct their marriage after the discovery of an affair.
- The model involves creating safety and hope in therapy, clarifying their therapeutic contract for marital therapy (e.g., committing to a specified number of counseling sessions), normalizing traumatic reactions to the betrayal of infidelity,
- Creating safety and hope in the marriage, reestablishing the marriage as the primary relationship, promoting positivity and caring in the couple.
Spring Treatment Model (1996):

- Constructed a three stage process to help guide clinicians working with couples that are trying to recover from an affair.
- The steps include:
  - Normalizing feelings,
  - Deciding whether to recommit or quit, and
  - Rebuilding the relationship.
Gordon, Baucom & Snyder’s Treatment Model (2004) - Integrative Treatment Design:

- Their model involves three stages including:

- Dealing with the impact of the affair, which involves absorbing and experiencing the impact of the interpersonal trauma;

- A search for meaning for the traumatic event along with gaining awareness of the implications for the new understanding; and

- Moving forward with one’s life within the context of a new set of relationship beliefs.
Diblasio’s Treatment Model Decision-Based Forgiveness Treatment Approach (2000):

- Consists of step-by-step strategies to help make forgiveness possible during the beginning of couples therapy
In general, the common factors among these treatment approaches include:

- Assessing the context of the affair,
- Understanding the emotional impact of the affair, and
- Clarifying the goals of therapy.
An important goal for couples dealing with infidelity is deciding if they want to continue the relationship.

Lusterman, 1998; Spring, 1996
Treatment Models

Weaknesses:

- The efficacy of these interventions have only been explored using case-study designs.
- These approaches do not appear to be well grounded in empirical research.
NOTE:

- The limited empirical literature that has focused on the healing process and positives outcomes includes work by Charny and Parnass (1995), Hansen (1987), and Olson et al. (2002).
- Charny and Parnass (1995) found that 15% of their couples reported that their relationships improved after the infidelity.
Olson et al.’s interviews (with individuals who had experienced infidelity revealed):

- A three-stage process following the disclosure of the infidelity.
- The process begins with an “emotional rollercoaster” and moves into a “moratorium” where individuals are trying to make meaning of the infidelity before they begin the final process of rebuilding “trust.”
Balswick & Balswick (1999) discovered that an affair can offer the couple an opportunity for growth through insight into the couple’s relational dynamics.
Hansen’s Study (1987):

- Found that for some of the participants
  - The infidelity improved the committed relationship.
  - 19.8% of the participants reported that having an affair improved the quality of their committed relationship a “great deal” and
  - 30.3% reported that the affair improved their committed relationship “somewhat.” Participants in their study also reported that a partner’s affair also helped to improve the quality of their relationship during which the affair occurred (5.5% for a “great deal” and 31.0% for “somewhat”) (Hansen, 1987).
The most frequently cited treatment model

Gordon, Baucom & Snyder (2005) view forgiveness as a process that partners go through in order to increase understanding of themselves, their relationship, and each other so that they can let go of negative feelings, behaviors, and thoughts following the occurrence of a betrayal such as infidelity (Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder, 2005).
Gordon and Baucom, (2005)

Conceptualized Forgiveness:

- As an ongoing process that takes time rather than a distinct event in time.
Forgiveness Is made of Three Elements:

- Gaining a more a realistic and balanced view of the relationship,
- Letting go of negative affect toward the partner who cheated along with increased empathy, and
- Decreasing the desire to punish the partner that cheated.
The Concept of Forgiveness:

- Gordon, Baucom, and Snyder (2005) define forgiveness as a process where partners seek to increase their understanding of themselves, each other, and their relationship so that they are able to free themselves from being dominated by negative feelings, thoughts, and behaviors after having lived through a major interpersonal betrayal.
Freedman and Enright (1996) and Hebl and Enright (1993):

- Found that forgiveness-based interventions that help individuals reframe an interpersonal trauma and achieve a better understanding of the reasons for the betrayal are effective treatments to increase an individuals’ level of forgiveness and improving their psychological functioning.
- They also found that using forgiveness type interventions are clinically useful in that they help to reduce hostility and anger, increase empathy, and increase positive feelings for individuals that are coping with an interpersonal conflict.
Forgiveness Process:

- The forgiveness process appears to be important in the recovery from affairs.
Saving a Marriage After an Affair:
Another key component of their model of forgiveness is that forgiveness in relationships closely corresponds to the recovery from a traumatic event (Gordon et al., 2005).
Extramarital Affair – Baucom et al. (2006):

- Pointed out that an extramarital affair is not merely a very negative event; rather
- It is an experience that shatters core beliefs essential to emotional security.
An affair may violate many important assumptions that individuals have about intimate relationships such as the belief that romantic partners can be trusted, or that relationships are a safe place (Baucom, Gordon, Snyder, Atkins, & Christensen, 2006).
The Forgiveness Process:

- Involves efforts to reconstruct these former cognitions and recover a sense of interpersonal:
  - Power,
  - Control, and
  - Security in the relationship (Gordon et al., 2004).
Viewing infidelity as an interpersonal trauma is based on the similarities between responses to the discovery of infidelity and responses to trauma in general (Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder, 2005).
Infidelity and Symptoms:

Many therapists have suggested that infidelity may result in symptoms comparable to those found in posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) including:

- Intense anger
- Feelings of shame
- Intrusive painful memories
- Depression
Infidelity and Symptoms: (Cont’d)

- Powerlessness
- Abandonment
- Victimization
- Persistent increased arousal, or
- Avoidance and emotional numbing

Glass & Wright, 1997; Gordon et al., 2004
Many treatment approaches for infidelity conceptualize recovery from an affair as similar to recovery from an interpersonal trauma.

Gordon & Baucom, 1999; Gordon et al., 2004; Gordon et al., 2005; Snyder et al., 2004
Recovering From Interpersonal Trauma:

- According to Gordon and Baucom (1999), individuals recover from interpersonal trauma by:
  - Cognitively processing the betrayal and
  - Learning how to rebuild their relationships
  - Moving past bitterness.
  - Developing compassion or empathy for each, and
  - Demonstrating behaviors that are intended to restore balance in their relationships.
Gordon and Baucom’s Model (1998):

- Involves addressing the impact of the affair by cognitively and behaviorally dealing with the issues that develop from the immediate impact of the event such as:
  - Depression
  - Emotional dysregulation, and the
  - Need to express feelings such as hurt or anger.
- To understand the context or the meaning of what happened.
- This stage is more cognitive and insight directed.
Gordon and Baucom’s Model (1998): (Cont’d)

- Empathy in this stage is promoted in order to help reduce anger and enhance understanding of the cheater’s decisions.
- The goals of this stage include:
  - Addressing the issue of forgiveness
  - Consolidating what has been learned about both the cheater and injured partner
  - Reexamining the relationship, and
  - Making the decision regarding whether the relationship will continue or not.
Forgiveness:

- Forgiveness appears to be a necessary component of the recovery process, it is important to be able to assess where individuals are in their course to recovery (Gordon and Baucom, 2003)
Forgiveness

After an Affair is Discovered:

Schwarzenegger opens up about affair on 60 Minutes - YouTube.mht
Integrative Forgiveness-Based Treatment Model – (Gordon et al., 2005):

- Their integrative forgiveness-based treatment model’s three major stages include:
  - Dealing with the impact,
  - A search for meaning, and
  - Recovery or moving forward.
NOTE:

- Assessing where individuals fall within these stages should be related to the individual and personal consequences that they are experiencing.
Stages of Forgiveness
Gordon and Baucom (1999):

- Discuss the specific parts of each stage of forgiveness and address challenges of each stage including:
  - Traumatic flashbacks
  - Defensiveness, and
  - Lack of affect
Family System Theories:

- Used to understand how individuals develop and sustain satisfying intimate relationships. Bowen’s family systems theory highlights the construct of differentiation of self as a key relationship variable that provides a framework for understanding interpersonal functioning.

Murdock, 2009
Bowen on Differentiation:

- Differentiation plays an essential role in the long-term intimacy and mutuality in marriage and should therefore be related to how individuals handle the challenges that have been linked to the specific stages of forgiveness that they are in (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).
Bowen on Differentiation: Defined

- Differences between individuals and between groups reflect differences in people's levels of differentiation of self. The less developed a person's "self," the more impact others have on his functioning and the more he tries to control, actively or passively, the functioning of others. The basic building blocks of a "self" are inborn, but an individual's family relationships during childhood and adolescence primarily determine how much "self" he develops.
Bowen on Differentiation of Self

Bowen (1978):

- Refers to the ability to experience both intimacy and autonomy within a relationship. Well-differentiated individuals are able to maintain a clearly defined sense of self and are able to hold to their own personal convictions even when pressured by others and at the same time allow others the space for their own positions. They also have flexible interpersonal boundaries that allow them to experience emotional intimacy without having the fear of merging (Bowen, 1978).

Kerr & Bowen, 1988
NOTE:

- Individuals with low levels of differentiation tend to:
  - Fuse in their interpersonal relationships
  - Distance themselves, and or
  - Emotionally cut off themselves

Kerr & Bowen, 1988
Well-Differentiated Individuals:

- Have been found to be more:
  - Resistant to the negative effects of stress compared to less differentiated individuals (Kerr & Bowen, 1988),
  - Tend to function better in stressful situations (Bowen, 1978), and are
  - Inclined to have more satisfying marriages (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).
Higher Differentiation of Self
Kerr (1992):

- In emotionally committed relationships, higher differentiation allows for the development of an autonomous self.
Less Differentiated Individuals
Kerr (1992):

- Engage in interpersonal distance regulation to manage anxiety.
Higher differentiated individuals are more at ease with intimacy and do not use fusion or emotional cutoff to regulate feelings of anxiety. As a result, when there is real or perceived separation from significant others, individuals who have lower levels of differentiation experience anxiety, which leads them to either fuse with others and become overwhelmed or emotionally cut off (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988).
Positive Relationship Between Differentiation and Quality of Relationship Functioning:

Many studies have found a positive relationship between differentiation and quality of relationship functioning. For example, individuals who evidence low levels of emotional reactivity and emotional cutoff reported significantly greater satisfaction with their partners compared to individuals who are lower in differentiation of self (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998).
Marital Satisfaction
Skowron (2000):

- Found that marital satisfaction was positively associated with:
  - Low levels of emotional reactivity
  - Emotional cut off, and
  - Fusion, along with
  - Higher levels of ability to take “I” positions in relationships
Emotional “Cutoff”
Skowron’s (2000):

- Demonstrated that emotional cutoff uniquely predicted marital discord. Therefore, it is assumed when couples in marriage, particularly the male partner, remain emotionally available to one another, it is more probable that both partners will experience the marriage as satisfactory.
Couple's Capability Skowron (2000):

- Concluded that the couple's capability to be closely connected with one another while still maintaining their individuality is a vital part of good marriages.
Establishing Autonomy (Individuals):

- Individuals that have been able to establish autonomy and emotional intimacy in their marriages without experiencing incapacitating fears of abandonment or feeling smothered should be able to better deal with their partners’ transgressions compared to individuals with lower levels of differentiation.
Individuals with Higher Differentiation:

- Should be more successful at dealing with the immediate issues and emotions that develop from the event without cutting off or reacting with unproductively high levels of emotionality, and more willing to explore the context of the affair and the factors that played a role in the cheater’s decision to cheat.
Forgiveness and Trauma:
Forgiveness:

- Is thought to be an important part of the recovery process from affairs.
In situations where the injured partner experiences severe interpersonal trauma and is dealing with intense feelings of shame, anger, depression, guilt, or anxiety, she or he may not be prepared yet to start cognitively processing or reframing the betrayal in order to begin rebuilding relationship.

For example, under extreme emotional duress it may not be possible to develop a new understanding of the traumatic event and reconstruct a new meaning for the affair, which are experiences that are needed to achieve high levels of stage three in the forgiveness model (Gordon & Baucom, 2003).
Variables that Predict Level of Trauma:
Factors that Predict Level of Trauma:

- Many factors are predicted to influence the level of trauma one experiences as a result of an event like an affair.
- For example, Gordon and Baucom (1999) stated that differences in affair patterns are apt to affect the level of experienced trauma.
NOTE:

- An individual’s response to a one-night stand is going to differ from the same person’s response to discovering that his or her partner was involved in a long-term extramarital affair.
One-Night Stand/Long-Term Affairs:

- **One-Night Stand**
  - May be interpreted as a mistake, whereas a,

- **Long-Term Affair**
  - Would conceivably represent a greater threat to the relationship’s stability and feelings of betrayal may be much more intense.

Gordon & Baucom, 1999; Baucom et al., 2006
NOTE:

- Time appears to be an important component of the recovery process.
- Rothbaum, Foa, Riggs, Murdock, and Walsh (1992), Orcutt, Erickson, and Wolfe (2004), Blanchard et al. (1996), Ehlers, Mayou, and Bryant (1998) and Shalev et al. (1998) also support this assumption in their findings that in regards to change over time, symptom rates of PTSD decrease after the initial exposure to the trauma.
Length of Time
(Since the Affair Took Place):

- Should be related to levels of trauma.
- Individuals who report longer amount of time since the infidelity took place will evidence lower levels of trauma compared to individuals who have experienced infidelity more recently.
Levels of One’s Commitment:

- May influence the level of trauma experienced. Stress that occurs within relational roles that are particularly significant to an individual’s sense of self is more likely to have a harmful impact on psychological health than stress that takes place in roles that the individual perceives as less vital (Marcussen, Ritter, & Safron, 2004).
Identity Relevancy

- Stressors that are “identity relevancy” are more foretelling of psychological well-being compared to stressors that are “identity-irrelevant.” Therefore, the more the individual has invested in his or her relationship such as children, time, or money, the more committed he or she will be to the relationship.

- Disruption of the relationship by infidelity may result in higher levels of trauma compared to individuals who are less committed to their relationships.
The Relationship Between Trauma and Differentiation of The Self:
Differentiation of Self:

- Is believed to affect a wide range of human emotions and experiences; under highly stressful situations, individuals with high and low differentiation of self both experience symptoms of stress (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988).
High Differentiation of Self
Bowen (1978):

- Individuals who are high in differentiation are better able to tolerate stress compared to Individuals who are lower in differentiation.

- Bowen hypothesized that the relationship between stress and symptoms would be moderated by differentiation of self in that the higher the level of differentiation of self, the greater the amount of stress that is needed in order for symptoms to become apparent.
Bowen (1978) and Kerr and Bowen (1988) concluded that individuals lower in differentiation of self will become more stressed and remain stressed for more extended amounts of time compared to individuals with higher levels of differentiation of self.
NOTE:

- If a person is not able to utilize adaptive coping mechanism such as reflective coping which entails a thoughtful, approach-oriented style of coping, then it becomes more difficult for such a person to effectively move through the stages of forgiveness.
Outcomes of the Recovery Process:
Individuals who evidence high levels of forgiveness in Gordon and Baucom’s (2003) three-stage model of recovery are predicted to experience higher levels of relational and life satisfaction compared to individuals reporting lower levels of forgiveness.

Improved relational and life satisfaction post-infidelity are probable when forgiveness is factored in.
Couples Who Report Forgiveness:

- Couples who report forgiveness after a serious transgression has taken place show more:
  - Investment in their marriages,
  - Greater psychological closeness,
  - More equal balance of power in their marriages, and
  - Higher levels of marital adjustment compared to couples that have not yet achieved forgiveness.

Gordon and Baucom (2003)
Model of Psychological Growth
Tedeschi and Calhoun’s (1995, 2004a):

- Growth stems from a perspective and thinking that pushes the individuals to a higher level of functioning than was present before the trauma occurred (i.e., the development of a stronger sense of self).
- Changes in assumptions about one’s “world view” allows an individuals to rebuild their life narratives to include new knowledge and understanding about life.
Posttraumatic Growth (PTG):

- The phenomenon of posttraumatic growth (PTG) is defined as a person’s ability to find benefit and meaning in relationships and life after a traumatic experience (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004a).
Posttraumatic Growth (PTG): (Cont’d)

- Measures of PTG examine how successful individuals have been in coping with the consequences of experiencing a trauma by examining how individuals reconstruct or strengthen their perceptions of others, the self, and the meaning of events (Tedehschi & Calhoun, 1996).
Five factors of PTG:

- Include:
  - Personal strength
  - New possibilities
  - Relating to others
  - Appreciation for life, and
  - Spiritual change (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).
Research on PTG
Tedeschi and Calhoun’s (2004b):

- Indicates that it is a positive outcome that comes from adapting to a trauma.
- PTG as a byproduct of the struggle with a trauma that leads to higher levels of functioning.
Staying Connected to One’s Partner:

- In order for individuals to try to forgive their partners’ infidelity, it may be important for them to stay connected to their partners.
- The forgiveness process entails partners seeking a better understanding of themselves, each other, and their relationship (Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder, 2005).
Being Emotionally Distant:

- If individuals are distant from their partners and their relationships, the emotional investment needed to begin the process of forgiveness may not be present.
Focusing on Positive Changes:

- Individuals who can focus on and identify positive changes as a result of the infidelity (i.e., those who experience posttraumatic growth) may experience higher levels of forgiveness in the wake of an affair compared to individuals who do not feel they have evolved positively.
NOTE:

- The process of forgiveness is affected by how satisfied one is with his or her relationship.
- Because the relationship between degree of trauma and differentiation of self does appear to be a variable influencing the forgiveness process, additional research should focus on what variables may influence the experience of trauma and how the above variables may be related to forgiveness.
Implications:
Because these constructs are found to be related to forgiveness, the information gathered during the initials sessions could help to provide a guide for what future sessions should look like (e.g., promoting a deeper understanding of why the affair took place to help promote posttraumatic growth; and focusing on areas of the relationship that may help to improve relational satisfaction).
Assessing Level of Differentiation of Self:

- Knowing that differentiation of one’s self influences the experience of forgiveness and also helps to guide the process of counseling.

- It may be helpful to teach therapist in training to formally and or informally assess level of differentiation of self. Assessing differentiation of self may help to provide the therapist with a rough idea of how clients emotionally respond to the infidelity.
Gaging the Clients Recovery Process:

- The results of these assessments could help therapist to gage how far along the client is in the recovery process (e.g., being completely emotionally cutoff from their partner may indicate less progress) and provide the therapist with information about specific variables to focus on during the sessions (e.g., focusing on reducing extreme emotional responses to the infidelity).
Forgiveness and the Healing Process:

- Because forgiveness has been found to be an important component of the healing process from infidelity, clinicians are encouraged to help foster forgiveness in their clients and educating therapists in training about forgiveness models is recommended.

Worthington et al. 2000 and McCullough & Worthington, 1995
Joining Support Groups:

- Therapists may also want to encourage clients to join group therapy sessions with other clients dealing with infidelity because psychoeducational group interventions have been found to be effective in promoting forgiveness.

McCullough & Worthington, 1995
On-Line Support Forums:

- The use on-line support forums specifically designed for individuals dealing with infidelity may also be a useful suggestion for clients.
- Online support groups have been found to help people effectively cope with a variety of problems and foster well-being by promoting personal empowerment, improving understanding and knowledge, and developing social relationships.

Barak, Boniel-Nissim, & Suler, 2008
On-Line Support Forums:

Getting Even after an Affair.flv
Conclusions and Future Research:

- Important areas for future research include:
  - Further exploration of variables that have been linked to forgiveness and the recovery process of infidelity such as:
    - Empathy
    - Acceptance
    - Religiosity
    - External support
    - Presence of children, and
    - How long the infidelity lasted

Blow & Harnett, 2005b; Rusbult et al., 2004; & Worthington, 1998; 2005
NOTE:

- The relationships between the many variables, particularly in regards to posttraumatic growth, relationship satisfaction, and forgiveness is not completely fully understood.
- Future research could provide helpful information about the recovery process and the corresponding variables that affect the ability to forgive.
The End: