

After an Affair: How Marital Therapy Heals the Wounds

Assuming that the affair is definitely over and that both partners want to continue their marriage -- and that's often a big "If" in these situations -- their first priority should be the restoration of trust. This can best be achieved by going together for help. If both partners seek only individual psychotherapy, this may again build a wall of secrecy and privacy between them and cause further alienation.

However, if the couple works together with a marriage and family therapist who is trained to treat these crises, they can put the infidelity in perspective, explore underlying marital problems, learn how to renew and transform their relationship, and avoid unnecessary divorces. (Or choose to divorce. Some couples may eventually decide during therapy that the marriage cannot be saved.)

But for those couples who want to save their marriage following an affair, marital therapy is often effective. While the person who had the affair is held accountable for his or her behavior, the therapist provides a safe, confidential, and balanced environment in which they all work together to explore and rebuild the marital relationship. It often takes one year of biweekly visits with the therapist and then another year of the couple working together to rebuild trust before they generally feel "healed."

Here's what you can expect if you and your partner ever choose to enter marriage therapy following an affair:

Phase I: Surge of Hope.

For the first month or so of marital therapy, a couple may feel quite good and hopeful about their relationship. The immediate crisis is subsiding, the decision to re-commit to the marriage has been made, and they have joined together in therapy to work on their marriage. "Let's put the infidelity behind us and move on," they say.

Phase II: No More Secrets

During this next phase, which often takes several months, the therapist will guide the couple through the difficult and often-painful process of taking a deeper look at the affair and other underlying problems in their relationship. To restore trust, the person who had the affair will need to be fully truthful and honest about any details that the injured spouse wants to know, such as the name of the other person involved in the affair and details of secret meetings and sexual encounters. This information may unleash anger and anguish that need to be dealt with openly in therapy.

The person who had the affair must also assume full personal responsibility for the affair and not pass the blame onto the spouse, personal or emotional problems, or work pressures. He or she must also take responsibility for his or her part in any underlying marital problems. Also, if this person needs to grieve the loss of the lover in the affair, this should be done privately or during individual sessions with the therapist and not in the presence of the spouse.

By the same token, the injured partner also has difficult work to do. He or she may need to come down from the pedestal, drop the saint or martyr role, move past the anger and hurt, and -- hardest of all -- be willing to examine his or her role in the underlying marriage problems.

Rebuilding trust is an uneven process that often takes three steps forward, two steps back.

The injured spouse may continue to be suspicious and insecure, experience painful flashbacks at unsuspecting times, or scrutinize the other partner's behavior especially around members of the opposite sex. The person who had the affair must learn to tolerate this distrust and not become self-righteous or indignant. The therapist then helps the couple understand how their respective reactions are understandable and learn how to better handle future incidents.

Phase III: New Beginnings

The final -- and longest -- phase of marital therapy is devoted to emotional recovery and rebuilding the relationship. During this phase, the therapist helps the couple learn new ways to relate to each other and how to put intensity, once drained by the affair, back into their sexual relationship. The couple gradually begins to restore emotional intimacy by learning how to express what they want and need from the relationship, as well as what changes they would like their partner to make.

The therapist also works with the couple to develop new communications skills and methods for resolving conflict, which was previously avoided and submerged in the affair.

Some couples begin "dating" again, starting from scratch to rebuild their relationship. They learn how to spend time alone together and enjoy each other's company. In addition, the therapist helps them learn how to ask for what they want and negotiate their differences.

Success is not guaranteed. For some couples, the affair turns out to be the final nail in a coffin after an emotional divorce has already taken place. Therapy can help them accept this reality and then support them and their family through the trauma of a divorce.

But for couples who are committed to saving their marriages and willing to do the necessary repair work together with a trained marital therapist, they often emerge with a better, closer, and stronger marriage than they ever imagined. For them, the affair represents a wake-up call and an opportunity to birth a new marriage.