Couples Planning: A Treatment Plan Overview for Couples with Infidelity Problems

Spend at least 1 hour developing a treatment plan using recommended settings.

Infidelity is a violation of the mutually agreed-upon rules or boundaries of an intimate relationship, which constitutes a significant breach of faith or a betrayal of core shared values with which the integrity of the relationship is defined. In common use, it describes an act of unfaithfulness to one’s husband, wife, or lover, whether sexual or non-sexual in nature.

There are two areas in a close relationship where infidelity mostly occurs: physical intimacy and emotional intimacy. Infidelity is not just about sex outside the relationship, but about trust, betrayal, lying and disloyalty. What makes infidelity so painful is the fact that it involves someone deliberately using deception to violate established expectations within a relationship.

Sexual infidelity refers to sexual activity with someone other than the partner one is committed to. Sexual infidelity in marriage is called adultery, philandering or an affair and in other interpersonal relationships it may be called cheating. A man whose wife has committed adultery is referred to as a cuckold, while a woman whose husband has cheated on her is known as a cuckquean.

What constitutes an act of infidelity varies between and within cultures and depends also on the type of relationship that exists between people. Even within an open relationship, infidelity may arise if a partner to the relationship acts outside of the understood boundaries of the relationship.

Emotional Infidelity refers to emotional involvement with another person, which leads one’s partner to channel emotional resources such as romantic love, time, and attention to someone else. With the association of multi-user dimensions the level of intimate involvement has extended from in-person involvement to online affairs.

Incidence of infidelity

Some researchers say there’s a 50-50 chance today that one partner will have an affair during a marriage; that includes non-physical relationships. Some authorities (for example Frank Pittman in ‘Grow Up’ Golden Books) observe infidelity is involved in 90% of first time divorces. A 1997 study with Kristina Gordon found 'more than half of the marriages that experience infidelity ended in divorce'.

27% of people who reported being happy in marriage admitted to having an affair. In a recent survey of 16,000 university students in 53 countries, 20% of long term relationships began when one or both partners were involved with someone else. Studies suggest that around 30% to 40% of dating relationships and 40% to 60% of marriages are marked by at least one incident of sexual infidelity. Men are more likely than women to have a sexual affair, regardless of whether or not they are in a married or dating relationship. By contrast John Gottman with his 35 years of research into marriage, is reported as saying
Only 20 percent of divorces are caused by an affair. Most marriages die with a whimper, as people turn away from one another, slowly growing apart.

Fifty United Kingdom divorce lawyers were asked to name the most common causes of their cases in 2003. Of those who cited extramarital affairs, 55% said it was usually the husbands and 45% said that it was the wives who cheated.

Gay men are more likely than lesbians to commit sexual infidelity. Study by Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) showed that 82% of gay male couples reported having nonmonogamous relationships, while lesbian couples reported 28%. Rates among older women tripled from 5% in 1991 to 15% in 2006; rates among men rose from 20% to 28%. About 20% of younger men and 15% of younger women say they cheated, up from about 15% and 12%, respectively. Infidelity studies show that extramarital sex occurs in up to 25% of heterosexual marriages in the USA, according to Adrian low, a Michigan State University professor who is a marriage and family therapist.

Children can be witnesses to an affair and outcomes of an affair. Between 10-15% of children are conceived as a result of an affair. In 2003 more than 3,000 DNA paternity tests were commissioned by Australian men. In almost a quarter of those cases, the test revealed that ‘their’ child had been fathered by someone else. In 30% of paternity tests commissioned by suspecting fathers and performed at the American Association of Blood Banks in the year 2000, the father was not the true biological parent.

Infidelity that does not involve sex or conception may be referred to as a romantic friendship or an emotional affair. Some people consider virtual sex, which is an on-line relationship, as infidelity.

In some jurisdictions an extramarital affair may incur unexpected financial costs. In Australia, for example, affairs of two or more years duration can be deemed a de-facto relationship, exposing the married cheater to financial claims in the Family Court on their superannuation savings, income and property. A de-facto relationship may exist even when the partners do not think so. It is the Court that will define when it began and ended, based on the evidence.

Problems with Infidelity Research

David Atkins, a research associate professor at the University of Washington in Seattle, outlined the problems researchers face in getting accurate information on the subject. Responses to the survey question Have you ever had sex with someone other than your spouse while you were married? aren't clear-cut, he said. The first thing we have to grapple with is honesty. We know that is a significant issue, he said, explaining that research published last year found that some won’t admit infidelity in person but will anonymously. Also, some people interpret sex as intercourse and others don’t, he said. The most reliable data, researchers say, comes from that question posed in the nationally representative General Social Survey, a face-to-face interview. Atkins’ new study of trends over a 15-year period from 1991 to 2006 in which 19,065 people participated found that infidelity rates were climbing among certain age groups: those 60 and older and those 35 and younger.

Infidelity at work

An office romance, work romance, or corporate affair is a romance that occurs between two people who work together in the same office, work location, or business.

Adulterous office romances are widely considered to be unhelpful to business and work relationships, but while boss-subordinate relationships are banned in 90% of companies with written policies about office romance, companies cannot ban adultery. In all but a handful of states, such regulations would run afoul of laws prohibiting discrimination on the basis of marital status. Nonetheless, firings often occur on the basis of charges of inappropriate office conduct.

Business travel creates an opportunity to cheat away from prying eyes, says infidelity expert Ruth Houston, author of Is he Cheating on You? 829 Telltale Signs. Academics and therapists say cheating is probably more prevalent on the road than close to home. The protection of the road offers a secret life of romance far from spouses or partners. Their
affairs range from one-night stands to relationships that last for years. They're usually with a co-worker, a business associate or someone they encounter repeatedly.

Different Types of Infidelity

Each case of infidelity serves a different purpose. Being able to justify the behavior of a spouse and define it will lessen some of the confusion. There are five categories of infidelity. These include: opportunistic infidelity, obligatory infidelity, romantic infidelity, conflicted romantic infidelity, and commemorative infidelity. Opportunistic infidelity occurs when a partner is in love and attached to a spouse, but surrenders to their sexual desire for someone else. This is driven by situational circumstances or opportunity and risk-taking behavior. Obligatory infidelity is based on fear, a fear that refraining from someone’s sexual advances will result in rejection. Some people end up cheating solely on the need for approval, even though they may still hold a strong attraction to their spouse. Romantic infidelity occurs when the cheater is, so to speak, falling out of love with his/her spouse. Their commitment to the marriage is what is most likely keeping them with their spouse. Conflicted romantic infidelity takes place when a person falls in love and has a strong sexual desire for multiple people at one time. Although there is the idea of one true love, it is possible to have a strong love attraction to more than one person at the same time. Commemorative infidelity occurs when a person has completely fallen out of love with their spouse, but is still in a committed relationship with them. These are all categories and reasons to which a spouse would cheat or have the notion to do so.

Make up or Breakup

Divorce is one response to marital infidelity. Another would be to seek couple’s therapy or counseling. With time to heal and the mutual goal of rebuilding the relationship, some couples emerge from infidelity with a stronger and more honest relationship than before. Relationship counseling can help put an affair into perspective, explore underlying relationship problems, learn how to rebuild and strengthen a relationship, and avoid divorce if that's the mutual goal.

Marriage counseling is generally provided by licensed therapists or clinical psychologists known as couple, marriage or family therapists. These therapists provide the same mental health services as other therapists, but with a specific focus on a couple's relationship. Relationship counseling typically brings partners together for joint sessions. The counselor or therapist helps couples pinpoint and understand the sources of their conflicts and try to resolve them. Partners evaluate both the good and bad parts of their relationship.

Intimate betrayal inflicts an attachment wound and this sometimes irreparable particularly when both partners aren't committed to repair. Sometimes a partner may choose to accept the infidelity of the other without repair of the relationship. This may be out of love or commitment for each other, commitment to their children, or financial stability.

Behavioral Indicators of Infidelity Problems in a Relationship:

1. Sexual behavior (such as, penile and vaginal intercourse, oral sex, anal sex) outside the relationship.
2. Nonsexual behavior that involves sharing intimate feelings and thoughts with a non-spouse or partner.
3. Secretly spending a large amount of one to one time together in intimate but nonsexual encounters with a non-spouse or partner.
4. One spouse or partner secretly spends a large amount of one to one time together in intimate sexual encounters with a non-spouse or partner.
5. One spouse or partner takes more interest in his/her appearance and clothing at certain times of the day or night.
6. One spouse or partner insists that an acquaintance is just a friend.
7. Secrecy involving behavior toward another person outside the relationship, such as secretly sending a dozen roses to an extramarital spouse or partner.
8. Demonstration of feelings of romantic attraction with another non-spouse or partner.
9. One spouse or partner takes less interest or reduction of planning and talk about the future together.
10. One spouse or partner takes one or more times each week or two where three hours or more are unaccounted.

Long Term Goals for Infidelity Problems in a Relationship:

1. Each spouse or partners are able to talk about affair related individual vulnerabilities and warning signs without becoming defensiveness.
2. Spouse or partners recognize and evaluate threats to their relationship.
3. Spouse or partners attempt to meet each other's emotional and physical needs.
4. Spouse or partners orally demonstrate empathy toward each other and share responsibility for reconstructing the relationship.
5. Through oral and/or written contract, spouse or partners clearly define and agree on values to be in place in the reconstructed relationship.
6. If relationship cannot be saved, spouse and partner agree to separate and terminate it, but only after a respectful assessment of what led to unfaithfulness.
7. Spouse or partners agree on proper emotional, social, and sexual limits with others such as acceptable and prohibited behavior).
8. Offended spouse or partner indicates a willingness to attempt to start in a process of forgiveness and to begin rebuilding a new trusting relationship.
9. Unfaithful spouse or partner apologizes for his or her decision to engage in an affair outside the relationship.
10. Unfaithful spouse or partner reveals as much about the affair as the offended spouse or partner wants to know in order to start rebuilding a trusting relationship.

Short Term Goals for Infidelity Problems in a Relationship:

1. Each spouse or partner Orally commit to: (a) relationship therapy, (b) ambivalence therapy, or (c) separation therapy.
2. Each spouse or partner makes safety assertions by (a) agreeing not to make threats regarding own safety.
3. Each spouse or partner agree not to make threats about the safety of others.
4. Each spouse or partner agrees to stop talk about difficult topics at home if either spouse or partner believes that the talk is about to escalate out-of-control.
5. Assess with each spouse or partner common reactions to traumatic events by reviewing the symptoms of Major Depressive Disorder and Pos-traumatic Stress Disorder, and identify which symptoms the offended spouse or partner is experiencing.
6. Unfaithful spouse or partner(s) agrees to openly admit to involvement in infidelity.
7. Unfaithful spouse or partner express full responsibility for the decision to choose infidelity and apologize directly for the pain caused to other spouse or partner, family, and friends.
8. Offended spouse or partner clearly express acceptance of apology from the unfaithful spouse or partner for the infidelity and agrees on willingness to begin the process of forgiveness.
9. Unfaithful spouse or partner orally agrees to stop all personal talk about sexual contact with lover and/or to openly share any future contact without being asked by spouse or partner.
10. Each spouse or partner talk about the strengths and needs of the relationship and of themselves as individuals.
11. Each spouse or partner talk about positive experiences during early stages of their relationship such as courting, early marriage.
12. Each spouse or partner agrees to develop a list of -pleasing your partner exercise- at home and bring the list to next therapy session.
13. Identify and list behavioral changes for self and spouse or partner that would energize the relationship, and prioritize the list in order of increasing amount of trust and commitment required for act.
14. Each spouse or partner agrees to use time-out technique to control volatile discussions.
15. Each spouse or partner will learn and practice role play to assure each other of what each will do if the lover attempts to contact either spouse or partner.
16. Each spouse or partner learns and give examples of constructive communication skills such as empathic listening or I statements.
17. Offended spouse or partner identify information he or she would like to know about the affair and bring these questions to a therapy session for an open discussion and not to conduct an inquiry at home.
18. Offended spouse or partner use anxiety management techniques to deal with disturbing thoughts about the affair.
19. Each spouse or partner will learn to employ communication skills to demonstrate understanding around trust, honesty, commitment, emotional safety.
20. Assign reading at home to become better informed on affair-related intrusive thoughts.
21. Offended spouse or partner objectively test that spouse or partner's trustworthiness.
22. Unfaithful spouse or partner will agree that such fact checking is a necessary part of reestablishing trust and will not attempt to persuade offended spouse or partner to stop checking up on him or her.
23. Each agrees to talk about context of the affair in therapy session.
24. Offender spouse or partner constructs a narrative of the affair by asking and answering questions about the beginning and course of the affair.
25. Each spouse or partner attempt to learn from the affair by identifying in therapy session the lessons they have learned and planning how to use the lessons to improve the relationship.
26. Each spouse or partner will develop meaningful rituals that aid relationship healing and symbolize moving forward together.

Interventions or Strategies for Infidelity Problems in a Relationship:

1. Agree on type of treatment that will be conducted: (a) relationship therapy (assuming that the affair will end and the goal will be to save the relationship); (b) ambivalence therapy (the goal will be to clarify the future of the relationship and the impact of the affair); (c) separation therapy (either client is decided to end the relationship, and goal is separate under positive terms.
2. Agree with spouses or partners that the therapist will not agree to secrecy with either, only establishing therapist's role as working toward the mutual well-being of the couple.
3. Contract with spouse and partner for a specific minimum number of therapy sessions.
4. Have spouse or partners contract to avoid any discussions about the affair or future of the relationship during the first month of treatment.
5. Assess for suicide and homicidal ideation by assessing any thoughts, intent, or means to hurt themselves or others.
6. Normalize offened spouse or partner's experience by discussing common reactions to trauma, and assessing which symptoms the offended spouse or partner may be experiencing.
7. Provide hope to both spouse or partners by informing them that many relationships do
survive infidelity, and that new assumptions can eventually replace old ones.
8. Educate on common course of therapy for infidelity, and that progress often also involves emotional setbacks, and that setbacks frequently occur during times of increased closeness or vulnerability.
9. Encourage unfaithful spouse or partner to take full responsibility for the affair and to apologize directly for the pain this decision caused to the offended spouse or partner, family, and friends.
10. Encourage offended spouse or partner to show a degree of acceptance of the apology from the unfaithful spouse or partner and to use this step to signify a beginning of the process of forgiveness even though offended and anger are understandably is still present.
11. Teach spouse and partner the stop and share technique, in which the unfaithful spouse or partner stops all contact (including non-sexual contact) with his or her lover, and agrees to stop all personal talk about his or her lover.
12. If contact does occur, unfaithful spouse or partner agrees to shares that fact with offended spouse or partner before he or she asks.
13. Initiate a verbal commitment from the unfaithful spouse or partner to implement the stop and share technique.
14. Assess current strengths and needs of relationship via interviews and checklists or questionnaires.
15. Assess pre-affair functioning by asking each spouse or partner for relationship history.
16. Encourage couple to answer the following questions: How did the two of you meet? What attracted you to each other? What qualities or characteristics did you find that you liked about your spouse or partner? How did the two of you decide to get married? How was the adjustment after you got married?
17. Assess the immediate highs and lows in the marriage prior to this affair?
18. Increase identification of caring behaviors.
19. Increase skill at identifying negative attention.
20. Assign each spouse and partner to catch each other at caring behaviors or negative behaviors.
21. Have each spouse or partner list exactly what changes each would like in order to feel more loved, respected, or committed.
22. List observable increases in positive behavior rather than decreases in negative behavior.
23. Assign each spouse or partner to list changes for the couple that would improve the and talk about the lists in conjoint therapy sessions.
24. Assign each partner to list behaviors that would benefit the relationship prioritize the list from least to greatest in terms of the effort each behavior would require.
25. Assign each partner to list behaviors that would benefit the relationship prioritize the list from least to greatest in terms of trust each behavior would require.
26. Assign each partner to list behaviors that would benefit the relationship prioritize the list from least to greatest in terms of sacrifice each behavior would require.
27. Seek mutual implementation of behaviors, requiring the least amount of trust and commitment first, following later with those of greater requirements.
28. Teach spouse and partner the six components of time-out technique such as self-monitoring for feelings of anger and how to signal to other spouse or partner that any verbal discussions should end allowing for cooling down to regain control of emotions.
29. Discuss a plan of what to do if lover attempts to contact them, and role play in therapy session likely reaction scenarios.
30. Assess current communication by having the couple engage in a short conversation about the affair, with therapist observing but not interrupting.
31. Teach communication skills, such as I statements and empathic listening, to enhance constructive, non-accusatory, no defensive communication.
32. Assign offended spouse or partner to list questions about the affair, to be discussed in
therapy sessions when the couple is ready to engage constructive exchanges.  
33. Teach and model anxiety-management techniques to help the offended spouse or partner cope with intrusive thoughts such as setting aside worry time intervals and using a thought-stopping exercise in which client says Stop to self and then substitutes a pleasant, relaxing thought for a disturbing one. 
34. Ask offended spouse or partner to openly describe any intrusive thoughts about the affair and have the unfaithful spouse or partner listen empathically and supportively. 
35. Have the unfaithful spouse paraphrasing the content of offended spouse or partner's statements and reflect the emotional meaning. 
36. Teach offended spouse or partner to begin reestablishing trust by focusing on his or her partner's current behavior rather than own disturbing thoughts. 
37. Have spouse or partners talk about important life events that took place during the years immediately before the affair. 
38. Ask each spouse or partner to describe their beliefs regarding monogamy, need for excitement, escapism, romantic love, admiration, and growth, and have the couple talk about how these beliefs may have made an affair more likely. 
39. Devise a plan for evaluating specific couple problems such as relationship or sexual dissatisfaction and negotiating a plan to implement proper interventions. 
40. Model questioning by making eye contact and asking questions in a calm, nonthreatening manner. 
41. Establish an proper time frame for ending or reducing repeated questioning about the affair. 
42. Teach offended spouse or partner how to ask factual questions (who, what, where, when). 
43. Teach offended how to ask why questions about the affair. 
44. Teach the offended spouse or partner how to ask specific factual questions in a calm, non-threatening manner. 
45. Teach the unfaithful spouse or partner how to answer questions directly without blaming the offended spouse or partner. 
46. Have each spouse or partner describe what they have learned about each other about the whole experience, that now can be used to improve relationship. 
47. Talk about prior history and how this may have influenced susceptibility to affair. For example, What did you learn about love from your father or mother? In what ways do these relate to your behavior around the affair? 
48. Ask each spouse or partner if there is a history of affairs in family of origin; and how this may have affected their feelings and behaviors about having the affair. 
49. Using brainstorming techniques, help couple develop a proper ritual to signify that unfaithful spouse or partner takes responsibility for the affair and wants forgiveness, and that the offended spouse grants forgiveness. This should convey that the affair is forgiven but not forgotten and that both will now move forward. 
50. Using brainstorming techniques, help spouse or partners devise a proper ritual to signify their recommitment to a monogamous relationship. 
51. Help the couple devise a plan for reclaiming places, people, or events affected by affair.