

Consider this surprising statistic: At least one or both parties in 50 percent of all couples, married and living together, straight and gay, will break their vows of sexual or emotional exclusivity during the lifetime of the relationship.

—Shirley Glass, *Not Just Friends*

It's true. Research shows that *half of all couples* will experience infidelity in their relationship. Reasons for affairs are many and complicated and outside the full scope of this article. What this article will attempt to address is some of the common factors that can contribute to affairs and what you can do to recover your relationship after an affair, should it fall prey to one.

[NB: For poly or open couples, consider an affair to be the bringing in of a third party without mutual consent.]

So what creates fertile grounds for affairs?

Just like a garden, relationships need to be nurtured and tended to. All too often, the garden of our relationship is left unattended; weeds grow and plants die due to lack of water and sun (i.e. care and attention). It is all too easy, especially in child-centered families, for partners to focus on the practicalities of childcare and rearing to the exclusion of their relationship.

Parents be warned! The seeds for a future affair can all too easily be sown in the early stages of starting a family! Neglecting your partner and your relationship for the sake of the children does not create a happy family, it creates emotional instability, especially if you or your partner start looking to fulfill your emotional needs outside the relationship. Make sure to devote some time to your relationship, too! Your children will be happier and more secure if they see parents who have a strong, loving bond, even if this means the kids don't always get to come first.

It is also easy, especially in long-term relationships, for couples with or without children to start taking each other for granted or fall into the rut of routine. While there is comfort in structure and predictability, you don't want to let your relationship become stagnant. Affairs are often a misguided way to seek excitement and aliveness. Unfortunately, having an affair will take you away from your primary relationship rather than toward it. In effect, you are starting a new garden somewhere else and leaving your current garden to wither in the dark. Make the effort to occasionally do something fun and different together. Why? It creates intimacy and brings growth and vitality to your relationship. As with gardening, you want to add fertilizer and occasionally turn the soil so that your plants and flowers will flourish.

Still, you could follow all the above suggestions and tend the garden of your relationship with much care and love, only to encounter the threat of an affair springing up like weeds. As Shirley Glass warns: ***“A happy marriage is not a vaccine against infidelity.”***

To really vaccinate your relationship against affairs, Shirley Glass recommends the following guidelines. While some might find them too restrictive—and, as one lesbian

couple complained, “too hetero” and another poly couple pointed out, “way too monogamous”—it is worth having them as a reference point. In the guidelines below, poly couples may want to replace the word *marriage* with *primary relationship*, but be warned: this list is definitely pro-monogamy!

7 Tips for Preventing Infidelity (from Shirley Glass)

- 1) *Maintain appropriate walls and windows.* Keep the windows opened at home. Put up privacy walls with those who could threaten your marriage.
- 2) *Recognize that work can be a danger zone.* Don't lunch or take private coffee breaks with the same person all the time. When you travel with a co-worker, meet in public rooms, not a room with a bed.
- 3) *Avoid emotional intimacy with attractive alternatives* to your committed relationship. Resist the desire to rescue an unhappy soul who pours his or her heart out to you.
- 4) *Protect your marriage by discussing relationship issues at home.* If you do need to talk to someone else about your marriage, be sure that person is a friend of your marriage. If the friend disparages marriage, respond with something positive about your own relationship.
- 5) *Keep old flames from reigniting.* If a former lover is coming to a class reunion, invite your partner to come along. If you value your marriage, think twice about having lunch alone with an old flame.
- 6) *Don't go over the line when on-line with internet friends.* Discuss your on-line friendships with your partner and show him or her your e-mail if he or she is interested. Invite your partner to join in correspondence so your internet friends won't get any wrong ideas. Don't exchange sexual fantasies online.
- 7) *Make sure your social network is supportive of your marriage.* Surround yourself with friends who are happily married and who don't believe in fooling around.

(I just want to note that tip 5 might be unrealistic within the lesbian community, as exes are so often part of one's community and even friendship circle.)

Let's look at the worst-case scenario. You or your partner has an affair. How can you help your relationship recover?

Most people think that talking about the affair with the spouse will only create more upset, but actually the opposite is true. Discussing the affair is the way to re-build trust and intimacy. It is important to deliberately focus on dealing with the affair and the fallout, not avoid it. Don't skip over this important repair stage! Time and patience are needed to rebuild the shattering of what was once the consensual reality. Discussing the evolution of the affair and being present for the aftermath allows for integration and understanding. From understanding flows forgiveness, and this is what is needed for partners to become close again.

There is a big difference in healing time between “disclosed infidelity” versus “discovered infidelity.” It is much better for the betrayed partner to be told about the

affair instead of discovering it accidentally. In either case, it is fairly typical for the betrayed partner to have a post-traumatic type of response to the discovery of the affair. There can be a nearly obsessive need to hear every detail of what happened and how the affair evolved. It is important for the partner who had the affair to answer all these questions, sometimes again and again. It improves the chance of a solid repair.

All that being said, the single best indicator of whether a relationship can survive infidelity is how much empathy the unfaithful partner shows for the pain they have caused, when the betrayed spouse is working through their hurt and anger. Remorse needs to be conveyed in both verbal and non-verbal ways. Just saying “sorry” won’t do. “Sorry” needs to be conveyed through the eyes, body language and actions wholeheartedly, again and again, until trust has been restored.

Other critical ingredients for healing are as follows:

- The betrayer needs to cut off contact with the third party, at least during the initial repair phase. This helps create a safe container for healing and trust to be restored.
- Make a commitment to honesty and ongoing open communication, even when honesty is uncomfortable and inconvenient. For instance, voluntary sharing about even a chance encounter with the third party will help rebuild trust. ***Honesty, in this case, means more than just “not lying”— it also means not withholding relevant information.***
- Allow time to heal and believe it is possible for your relationship to recover. Believe it or not, 70% of all couples choose to stay and try and repair their relationship, even after infidelity.

Healing from an affair can fortify a couple’s bond exponentially if partners are willing and able to show up for the repair work. Couples do heal and move past infidelity and become stronger as a result. Repairing breaches in trust requires care and attention from both members of a couple. The garden of your relationship can only be improved by maintaining and caring for it together.