

## After an affair

It is very painful to discover your partner has had an affair. But not all affairs are the same. It can range from a one-night stand that “meant nothing”, to a brief relationship on a work trip or holiday, to months or years. It can mean exchanging secret, intimate messages or conversations between two people who may even never have had actual sex. Yes, I would count secret messages or letters as infidelity – they are a kind of betrayal or disloyalty.

So what happens after an affair is discovered? It is often a massive shock for both partners. The one who was betrayed may be angry, or depressed. They have lost trust, and maybe a sense of reality: not sure *what* to believe any more. Nothing makes sense. They may keep thinking about it, asking questions, wanting to check up on their partner or the third person. They may want revenge.

The other partner has also had a shock – they may have suddenly lost their relationship with the third person, and may at the same time be in danger of losing their partner. Double loss. And they may have been brought face-to-face with some truths about themselves that they weren't really facing. Perhaps they didn't think *they* were like that.

If I am working with a couple in this situation, there is no fixed plan. Every couple is different. However, there are some steps that often apply:

- It's best if sudden dramatic reactions can be avoided, though this is hard.
- The truth has to come out. In order for trust to be rebuilt, there has to be full disclosure of whatever the betrayed partner wants to know.
- They may want to know things like, when and how did it start? How many times did you meet up? Did you take them to any of “our” places? Were you texting them when we were on holiday together? What did you say to them about me? *It is vital for these questions to be answered truthfully, if trust is to be restored.* Doing this with a counsellor present can help to make this process safer.
- It doesn't help for the person who had the affair to tell the other how to cope, or to tell them that they need to “move on” or “we need to get past this”. They may mean well, but that never works. If they refuse to discuss it, the feeling of lost trust is worsened.
- There needs to be *no ongoing contact* with the affair partner.
- Once things have calmed down, the *reasons* for the affair will need to be thought about. However, this can't be done too quickly.
- Then there will be a re-evaluation of the relationship, re-creating it on a new, better footing, or possibly ending it.

Previous problems or dissatisfactions in the relationship do *not* justify an affair. Nothing does. However, the previous state of the relationship will need improving in due course. The person who had the affair has to take complete *responsibility* for their actions – but that's not the same as saying the other partner doesn't have to change in any way.

I have generally not found it helpful to work with a couple where an affair or a pattern of infidelity is still ongoing. It's not helpful for me to try to get someone to change something they haven't agreed they want to change, so I am not going to try to *make* someone stop an affair. They have to decide.