

Infidelity: An Opportunity For Marital Truthfulness

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Fidelity is the spoken and unspoken rule of most marriages. There are the vows at the beginning of the marriage. There are ongoing promises of fidelity. Fidelity is required by the culture of marriage, especially here in the United States.

Spouses fear infidelity, and for good reason. They see other marriages dissolve as a result of it. Infidelity seems to always have the effect of a fire -- uncontrollable and unpredictable. It often destroys a marriage. But does it have to?

When I work with [marital mediation](#) clients, infidelity is often the precipitating factor that brings them to my office. One of my approaches is to "normalize" my clients' situation. I call it the "you're married, not dead" technique. What that means is infidelity, in thought or in action, is an issue that likely affects all marriages, whether acted upon or not. That's why [President Carter's comment](#) in 1976 -- "I've committed adultery in my heart many times..." -- continues to reverberate throughout the national consciousness.

Married couples need to accept this truth and not pretend that the problem doesn't exist. The question is not whether you feel attractions for other people at times, but how you decide handle it. The other issue these attractions raise is what is missing in your marriage, and what can you do about it. Generally the problem is faulty communication -- not sex, which people commonly assume.

A number of academics are now working in the field of what makes people happy. Part of the work is studying the concept of ["hedonic adaptation"](#). What this means is when we get what we want, what we wanted loses its allure very quickly. We adapt to the pleasures, and they are no longer strongly pleasant to us. That's why the so-called ["marriage boost"](#) (the honeymoon period after a marriage) only lasts about two years.

What is a married couple to do when faced with this reality? Some stray from the marriage to try to achieve that "high" feeling again. Unfortunately, that "high" feeling, like the high when you first got married, also fades because of the "hedonic adaptation". So often you're right back at the place you started: working on a relationship that is imperfect.

The other mistake people make is that if they have or had embarked on an infidelity, they think their marriage is over. To the contrary, you have the opportunity to consider the affair a wake-up call. You can reframe it as a good thing to have happened. There is a potential solution, and that is truthfulness. And you might find truthfulness to be a powerful cure to what's ailing your marriage.

Here are a few ways to avoid infidelity in your marriage, or -- if there has been infidelity or thoughts of infidelity -- to begin recovering from it.

1. Be truthful in your marriage. Problems in marriage arise not because spouses are different or have different views. That's always the case once the honeymoon is over. Marriages suffer when spouses are not being truthful to each other. The untruths can be evident in all sorts of little ways. Most of these are non-sexual and relate to views and choices in daily life.

For instance, it is common to go along with the wishes of your spouse without expressing your own views. However, because we all like to avoid conflict, we then get mad at our spouse --

usually silently. Or your spouse could say or do something -- generally something very minor -- that annoys you intensely.

When the annoyance is discussed (and this is great material to bring into a third-party session with a marital mediator or a marital counselor), you will often find out that there has been rampant and innocent misunderstanding. A great source for homework on these issues is Sharon Strand Ellison's book, [*Taking the War Out of Our Words*](#).

2. Don't think that small daily interchanges are insignificant. Remember, it's generally the little verbal interchanges that eventually undermine a marriage and make it unsatisfactory. Discussing something with a spouse can quickly turn into a very "hot" communication. Try to ask your spouse -- innocently -- what he or she means. You might be very surprised at your spouse's response. When you approach a discussion without assumptions, you will find truthfulness. The clarity this produces increases marital satisfaction and boosts affection. You might call it an emotional aphrodisiac.

3. Don't be deceptive. The main problem in infidelity is not the straying or the sex, but the deception. Most infidelities are accomplished (or intended to be accomplished) without the knowledge of the other spouse. This requires an elaborate subterfuge, and lying to your spouse's face. So simply choose not to deceive if you must have an affair.

4. Ask your spouse for permission. What if, when a spouse was attracted to another person, he or she told the other spouse? What if he or she told the spouse prior to the onset of the physical or emotional affair? This would bring an element of truth into the marriage. What if you actually asked your spouse for permission to have the affair? One of my readers (OK, I admit, it was my spouse) commented: "Are you crazy? It would take all the fun out of it!" So I guess I'm on the right track!

5. Talk about the attraction with your spouse. If you do, you may well find in the discussion that there are ways that each of you is deeply dissatisfied in the marriage. You might move towards ways in which you can better meet each other's needs. The affair may or may not proceed, but if the ground rules are "no deception", the affair may have much less power. And since there is no deception, the other spouse may not feel so victimized.

6. Don't think that forgiveness is the solution. A theme in many articles on infidelity is that the "wronged" spouse must be able to move past the hurt of the other spouse's infidelity and be able to forgive the straying spouse. Then the marriage can move on and has a chance of healing. But the concepts of forgiveness and blame may not be very productive in resolving the aftermath of an infidelity, because they don't address the root of the problem. The problem lies with the couple and the couple's interactions. One party alone hasn't created the problem; they both have. They must both work -- if they so choose -- to make their marriage better. A strict regimen of truthfulness and truth saying in every interaction is the best repair route to any marriage.

Thoughts of infidelity is a very human condition. Try the remedy of truthfulness in your marriage. Not just truthfulness about sexual desires, but truthfulness in all little ways. See where that gets you. And if there has been an infidelity, talk about it truthfully. The person who has had the infidelity should be very explicit in recounting his or her thoughts and emotions both during the infidelity and in the aftermath. The truth is what is important. Blame has no place in this process. Truth heals. The truth is what will set you free.