



As published on VallierTherapy.com

Repairing a Relationship After an Affair

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Alison and Frank have been married for 12 years and have three children. One day, after taking their son to school, Alison spotted Frank in a coffee shop holding hands with another woman and whispering intimately. She felt as though the ground was slipping away beneath her. How could this be happening? How would they ever recover?

Exact numbers are hard to come by, but some studies reveal that about half of married people in the U.S. will engage in infidelity at some point during their marriage. What do you do when it happens in your relationship? How do you know if your relationship is worth saving? And how can you repair such a catastrophic betrayal?

The Trauma of Discovery

When infidelity invades a relationship, it often permeates the atmosphere long before the affair is discovered. While one partner may cope with suspicion, low self-esteem and resentment, the other partner may wrestle with guilt and the fear of being caught.

When the affair is actually confirmed and brought into the open, it is a traumatic event for both people. For the person who discovers the affair, there is the agony of betrayal. For the one having the affair, there may be a sickening mixture of remorse and relief—at least now the secrecy can end.

The First Stage of Healing

Before any talk of next steps for the relationship, marriage or family, some fundamental healing must take place. The person who discovered the affair must be allowed to vent his or her feelings in a safe way and with plenty of support.

The one who is having the affair needs to first and foremost end the affair—no healing can happen until that step is complete. He or she also must give the other partner the time and space needed to find enough balance to continue to the next stage.

Each person would benefit from individual therapy. However, couples therapy is crucial in this process for healing to take place.

Assessing the Relationship

The discovery of an affair highlights underlying issues that had been threatening the relationship. Then the couple can decide if the relationship is worth repairing.

In therapy, Frank faced his feelings of resentment about Alison's long work hours, and Alison received support coping with feelings of betrayal that harkened back to her father's affair when she was a teenager.

Like others who have discovered an affair, Alison got plenty of advice to leave the marriage. It was an emotional, confusing time that shook the foundation of her whole life.

Ultimately, the decision to leave the relationship or marriage is yours alone, but here are four important questions that can guide you if you have discovered an affair:

1. Has your partner or spouse taken responsibility and expressed remorse?
2. Has your partner or spouse ended the affair?
3. Is he or she willing to attend couples therapy?
4. Do you share the same values and goals for the future? Is this someone you are excited about spending the rest of your life with? (These last questions are just as crucial for the person who had the affair.)

Repairing the Relationship

Ultimately, Alison and Frank decided to stay together, partly because of their three children. And their healing had to include the whole family. Each child attended individual therapy as well as group sessions with everyone.

This process can be exhausting but illuminating, and families who go through this type of trauma often come out with stronger bonds and a deeper understanding of each other.

Here, finally, is a summary of the healing steps to take after the discovery of an affair:

Get support. Make sure both partners have adequate support to individually express their feelings. This can include not only individual therapy, but also family therapy if there are children involved.

Get to the bottom. Work separately and together to look at the root causes of the affair and the health of the relationship.

Get together. Use the couples therapy process to communicate honestly and respectfully about whether you will stay together or move on.

Get better. Involve each person in strengthening the family bond.

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